

Ohio House Finance, Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education
Executive Budget Proposal for SFY 2024-2025
Kara Wente, Director, Governor's Children's Initiative
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Chair Richardson, Ranking Member Isaacsohn, and members of the subcommittee I am Kara Wente, Director of Children's Initiatives for Governor Mike DeWine. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the 2024-2025 Executive Budget proposal. I am here today to ask for your support for the Governor's proposal to create a new agency focused on children, the Department of Children and Youth, with a plan to improve child outcomes across the state without new administrative funding or staffing.

The WHY

The Governor has been steadfast in his focus on ensuring all children, no matter their zip code, have the opportunity to reach their full potential. Over the last four years, with your support, we have provided new working families with access to affordable child care, provided much-needed funding to county child welfare agencies, served more vulnerable families with voluntary home visiting programs, and embedded mental health services in child care and preschools to serve children, families, and teachers, and much more. However, even with these investments Ohio is falling behind other states in overall child outcomes. In 2014, Ohio ranked 24th nationally for overall child wellbeing. Today, Ohio ranks among the bottom half of states, at 31st.

This is unacceptable and we must do better.

The WHAT

Governor DeWine's Executive Budget Proposal includes strategic investments to support programs scientifically proven to improve outcomes for children – such as prenatal care for pregnant women, evidence-based home visiting, and quality child care.

While these resources are essential to ensure that healthy pregnancies result in healthy, resilient children, critical programs continue to be scattered across numerous state agencies. Without a single point of accountability, we cannot ensure that our children receive the services they need at the time they need them.

This is why Governor DeWine's Executive Budget Proposal included language creating the Department of Children and Youth, pulling programs from across six different state agencies under a single roof. It creates one entity responsible for waking up each morning and thinking -- how do we better serve Ohio's children?

The legislative language establishes the Department on July 1, 2023, but provides until January 1, 2025, for complete transition. Our goal is a seamless launch for the children served, the local partners that provide critical services, and the teams who serve them while maintaining momentum on current initiatives.

The HOW

Like you, Governor DeWine does not want to grow government or bureaucracy. In fact, under the DeWine-Husted Administration, we have seen the size of state government reduce by roughly 5% -- that's nearly 2,000 employees. Given this commitment to safely shrinking the size of state government without impacting essential services, the Department of Children and Youth is requesting no additional administrative funding or new staff headcount. We believe that by focusing on functions across programs – such as policy, training, and technical assistance – we can break down bureaucratic silos to more strategically leverage existing staff, positions and resources. As a result, the Department will:

- Reduce regulations and red tape for regulated entities;
- Eliminate programmatic duplication;
- Embed complimentary program staff with one another to promote efficiency, programmatic improvements, and more seamless service delivery for families;
- Consolidate funding for programs under a single fiscal office to promote long-term sustainability and efficiencies;
- Combine office functions to better leverage staff when emergencies arise – for example consolidate and cross train licensing specialists across child care, early childhood education, and foster care to better respond to dramatic increases in licensing needs in any sector.

To expand on this one example, currently two agencies employ more than 120 licensing staff for foster care, child care, and early childhood education. Certainly there are nuances to licensing based on location and function but the overall concepts for background checks and child safety are the same. By aligning these regulatory functions under one agency, we will create capacity and consistency. When we receive an influx of child care or foster care applications we will be able to leverage more staff to meet the needs of the community and also better support our local governments when they experience a staffing crisis.

Before proposing the new agency, we reviewed what other states were doing, what has been done in the past here in Ohio, and what lessons have been learned. The idea of a single entity focused on children in Ohio is not new. Under Governor Ted Strickland, a Center for Early Childhood Development was proposed within the Department of Education, to pull child serving programs together. Governor John Kasich – recognizing the need for additional focus on early childhood programs -- created a 21st Century Early Childhood Officer through the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant. Through both of these initiatives, we saw greater focus on and achievements for our children, but, as evidenced by the data, it was not enough.

This is why, just moments after taking office, Governor Mike DeWine signed Executive Order 2019-02D, creating the Governor's Children's Initiative, elevating this work, to the cabinet level. Through this work, we have come to recognize limitations of the Children's Initiative as well. Without a single point of accountability with the ability to prioritize cross program funding, enrollment and data collection and review we struggle to make the changes necessary to better serve our children and we cannot hold to the level of accountability and transparency needed to ensure we are achieving the best outcomes for our children. We can do better, and the time is now.

By integrating these various systems under a single umbrella, we can:

- Continue to ensure the privacy of the children and families served by these programs, while also measuring which programs promote the best outcomes for children, when and why children disenroll in our programs, barriers for families to enroll children in needed services and so much more.
- Collectively, this allows us to be more thoughtful in our approach to funding, to maximize limited state resources on the things that matter most to our children and their futures, and it allows us to have better insight on outcomes to know what services and supports are truly making a difference.

Additionally, by aligning fiscal, grants management, and procurement processes, we can eliminate duplication for the many programs that deliver essential services across the state. For many non-profit organizations, small businesses, and local governments, navigating the requirements, systems, funding cycles, and accountability measures used by the various state agencies is duplicative and burdensome.

By streamlining these within a single agency, we can better support our citizens to deliver the programs that the children in their community need to thrive. That said, this does not require restructuring at the local level. Those decisions remain with county leadership, but we believe the accessibility, transparency, and accountability provided by the Department of Children and Youth will ultimately better support our local agencies and organizations.

The ASK

All of us agree – our children are our future. They only have one chance to grow up. There are no dress rehearsals. So, we – the adults – must do everything in our power to give every single child born in Ohio the best possible start in life, which the research and evidence shows is the best way to ensure that children grow into productive citizens.

If we want other states to stop surpassing us and maintain our competitive edge economically, we must not only invest in our children, but ensure we are fully dedicated to their wellbeing from the second they are born. We have found the interests of those with developmental disabilities, addiction, and mental illness to be profound enough to establish dedicated agencies to serve them, as well as injured workers, older Ohioans, and veterans. Don't our children deserve the same focus and attention?

The Department of Children and Youth has requested NO ADDITIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE FUNDING, or HEADCOUNT while striving to improve services, promote greater transparency and accountability, and begin to meaningfully move the needle for children in Ohio. The time is now to meet our children where they are to ensure they have every opportunity to succeed. We hope you will join us in paving a better path for Ohio's children through the Department of Children and Youth.