

Ian Lewis, COO, Little Scholars Child Care
Testimony for House Bill 33
Senate Health Committee
May 10, 2023

Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, and Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Senate Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Ian Lewis. I am a father, husband, and a combat veteran of the United States Marine Corps. I am a small business owner/operator from Lake County, Ohio and my family has been providing 5 Star Step Up To Quality Early Childhood Education programs in our community for over 30 years.

In the 10 years that I have served as Chief Operating Officer for Little Scholars, I have developed a passion certainly for the children, but perhaps even more so for the development of our workforce. We currently employ 77 incredible people across 8 licensed childcare campuses who have chosen to dedicate their lives to the education and well-being of the children and families in our community. These teachers, aides, and support staff are mothers, fathers, students, caretakers, and breadwinners. They are kind, compassionate, and hard-working. They are dedicated to continuing their education so that we may execute our vision, "To create opportunity for every child".

They are overworked and under-compensated.

I could spend hours telling stories of how these single moms, parents, grandparents, and young professionals work tirelessly every single day to provide for the families that choose us to care for their children, nearly 70% of which are covering tuition costs through ODJFS childcare vouchers. Instead, I'd like to share an example of how the economics in our essential field are upside down, and how the current state-sponsored benefits system only exaggerates the problem.

I have a single mom that works for me as a before and after-school teacher and summer camp school-age lead teacher. She has a 4-year-old daughter who attends our program. She currently earns \$12.50 per hour. In the past 12 months, this single mom has refused 2 separate wage increases that our leadership team worked incredibly hard to figure out how to offer to all of our employees, most recently in January of this year which would have had her making \$19.00 per hour. She refuses these wage increases because she would then lose the benefits that she relies on for food, housing, and childcare. As an employer with a passion for the development of our staff, it is incredibly frustrating that even offering a 52% increase in salary doesn't make sense for this person. Instead, she continues to work part time at a lower wage so that she can live reasonably.

Quality childcare costs are through the roof. Our costs (office and classroom supplies, food, internet and phone, rent, and staffing) are up more than 41% from just 2 years ago. I could not charge a high enough tuition to cover these costs. Today's parents have the very real decision to make on whether or not it is even worth it for both parents to work and send their children to a quality program that will help prepare them for primary school. A very real option for parents is to have a relative or a neighbor care for their kids. Given what we know about quality ECE programs and the tremendous impact programs like ours have on Kindergarten readiness, it is the **children** that lose!

I understand that a \$150 million investment in childcare scholarships for critical workers has been removed from the Governor's budget. This needs to be restored. Will this solve the economics of quality childcare in Ohio? Hardly. However, it will help the critical workers that I employ remove the barrier of childcare expense from their budget. It will help employers like me attract and retain the wonderfully talented and caring individuals who are willing to teach and care for our most precious resource; our children.

Thank you very much for your time.