

## Testimony to the Senate Education Committee

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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 Patty Wenzel, I have been in the field of early childhood care and education for close to 35 years. My first center-based experience was on a Naval base in Guam. Then my experience led me to over 15 years as a Family Childcare Provider in Cuyahoga County, and currently, I am, and have been and for the past 17 years, the administrator of a large faith-based, 5-star Step Up To Quality, childcare program in Geauga County.

I would first like to address our current workforce challenges. Early childhood care and education is dependent on and only currently surviving purely on those with a true passion for making a difference in the lives of young children. Unfortunately, there are so many wonderful, compassionate people with that passion for the work we do, that tearfully and emotionally leave the field out of life's necessity. These people have been forced to leave the field because they need to earn a worthy wage, with quality health insurance. I lost a fantastic, educated, and kindhearted lead teacher to Costco. She needed to make more money as she was moving out on her own and she aged out of her family's health plan. Sadly, what we were paying just wasn't enough to cover her expenses.

As you are well aware, increasing the starting rate of new hires then causes a trickle-up effect, as I call it. We have had to increase the wages of our current staff to balance the scale which then results in the need to increase tuition rates. Then, all of our families will need their pay scale increased to meet their newly increased tuition expense. We are pleading for assistance to allow us to offer a fair, competitive, and well deserved salary to recruit and retain quality staff to prepare our youngest children for their beginning school years.

We ask that you restore the \$150 million investment in childcare scholarships for workers in critical occupations that was included in the Governor's budget

Our second most profound struggle is providing early childhood mental health education, resources, and support to our families.

Every day we provide quality childcare to the children of grownups who are called to serve our community in so many other ways. They are gifted and talented in what they do but at times, they struggle with the knowledge and skills it takes to raise and support their very own young children. Each and every family takes a newborn home from the hospital without a parenting handbook. Today's young children are struggling with speech delays, waning social confidence, and limited resilience to name a few.

We also need the means to financially provide our families with the training, resources, and support to be the very best they can be for their children. Our families need our help and guidance to empower their children to be confident, resilient and emotionally stronger BEFORE they start elementary school! Think of how much more productive they can be in K and beyond as they head off to the next step in their education with the necessary tools.

We ask that you restore the \$10 million that was included in the Governor's budget for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation.

Thank you for your time and consideration.