

Shaniqua Sealey  
OLEC Prep Academy  
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Testimony on House Bill 96

Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on HB 96. My name is Shaniqua Sealey, I am the Director of OLEC Prep Academy and I represent the CEO Project. I am here to ask that you support Ohio kids, families, and childcare providers by including the childcare improvements outlined in Governor DeWine's executive budget, especially investing in childcare as the workforce behind the workforce.

#### Investing in Childcare:

A Call to Support House Bill 96 Honorable members of the Children and Human Services Committee, As a childcare provider in Columbus, Ohio, with 12 years of experience serving hundreds of families, I urge you to support House Bill 96. Childcare is not just a service; it is the backbone of our workforce and an essential component of a thriving society. Working parents depend on reliable childcare to sustain employment, contribute to the economy, and provide stability for their families. The children we care for today are the future of our communities, and they deserve the highest quality of early education and development opportunities. By prioritizing investment in publicly funded childcare, we are securing a better future for both working families and the next generation.

#### Funding and Priority for Publicly Funded Childcare

House Bill 96 (Page 2704) ensures that publicly funded childcare eligibility prioritizes low-income families and those who have previously received assistance. This provision is critical because it guarantees continuity of care for vulnerable children who rely on these services. Families facing economic hardships should not have to worry about whether their children will have a safe and educational environment while they work or seek employment. Furthermore, the bill confirms that the Department of Children and Youth is responsible for administering and coordinating federal and state funds for publicly funded childcare (Page 2693). This affirms that childcare investment is already a government priority and should be expanded, not diminished. Without sufficient funding, many childcare providers, including my own center, struggle to maintain quality services, pay competitive wages, and keep up with operational costs.

#### Ensuring Fair Payment and Quality in Childcare

One of the biggest challenges we face in the childcare industry is retaining quality educators due to low wages. House Bill 96 addresses this issue by offering enhanced reimbursement rates to providers who participate in the "Step Up to Quality" program (Page 2696). This initiative incentivizes childcare centers to exceed minimum care standards, ensuring that children receive high-quality early education. During the pandemic, grants allowed us to pay qualified teachers, which directly improved student outcomes. When children feel safe and supported by skilled educators, they develop an

eagerness to learn. Without fair compensation, we risk losing passionate educators who play a crucial role in shaping young minds. If we cannot retain quality staff, it is the children and families who suffer the most.

#### Eligibility and Accessibility for Working Families

Childcare is a necessity, not a luxury, for working families. House Bill 96 ensures that employed parents, as well as those enrolled in education or training programs, have access to publicly funded childcare (Page 2703). This reinforces the idea that childcare is essential for workforce participation.

I have personally seen how access to affordable childcare empowers parents to pursue careers, further their education, and break cycles of poverty. Many of the families I serve depend on these programs to maintain employment and provide for their children. Without reliable childcare, they would be forced to leave their jobs, creating economic instability for both their households and our community.

#### Early Childhood Education Grant Program & Kindergarten Readiness

House Bill 96 (Page 2712) establishes the Early Childhood Education Grant Program, which supports and invests in early learning programs across Ohio. This initiative is vital because research consistently shows that high-quality early childhood education leads to better long-term academic success. The bill further emphasizes this by allocating funds to improve kindergarten readiness (Page 4003). At my center, we have witnessed firsthand how investments in early learning transform children's abilities. The grants we received allowed us to develop a STEM area, where children explore scientific concepts through experiments and problem-solving. These experiences cultivate curiosity, critical thinking, and a love for learning—foundational skills that prepare them for future academic success.

#### Improved Accessibility and Support for Childcare Providers

The bill recognizes the need for childcare accessibility, especially in low-income areas (Page 2693). The Department of Children and Youth is tasked with encouraging the development of suitable childcare throughout the state, ensuring that families who need it most have access.

This is particularly important for my center and many others like it. The funding we received enabled us to enhance our indoor gross motor space, giving children the opportunity to engage in physical activities that promote health and coordination. With better equipment, including new jump ropes, safer gym flooring, and tricycles, our students can develop physical and social skills that contribute to their overall well-being.

#### Conclusion: An Investment in the Future

Investing in childcare is investing in the future. House Bill 96 ensures that publicly funded childcare remains accessible, that providers receive fair compensation, and that children receive high-quality early education. Without continued financial support, childcare centers will struggle to survive, parents will face employment barriers, and children will miss out on critical developmental opportunities.

I urge this committee to support House Bill 96. Childcare is the workforce behind the workforce, and the future of Ohio's children depends on the decisions made today. Let's make the right choice—invest in childcare, invest in working families, and invest in our collective future.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,  
Shaniqua Sealey  
Childcare Provider, Columbus, Ohio