

Michelle Shelton, Director
Learning Grove – East Walnut Hills

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Ohio House of Representatives Children and Human Services Committee

Chairperson White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Michelle Shelton. I am a parent and grandparent from Cincinnati. I have also been an early childhood professional for over 25 years and am currently the Center Director of Learning Grove – East Walnut Hills. I write today to urge you to prioritize critical investments in early childhood programs in Ohio's FY2026-27 state budget, House Bill 96, but I want to specifically focus on early intervention.

I ask you to maintain or increase the early intervention portion of the Governor's budget to streamline and systematize the intervention process across the state, ensure timely evaluations and provide adequate staffing in school districts to handle the increased number of children who qualify for early intervention services.

As an early childhood professional, I work with infants, toddlers and preschoolers. I know personally what research confirms, that one in three children who receive early intervention in their earliest years will no longer need specialized services when they enter kindergarten which makes this investment critical for long term educational success, as well as saving money in the future. But we face multiple challenges ensuring children have these services. The Governor's budget addresses some of them and we urge you to support it.

Running a childcare center, I am acutely aware of the increased number of children who need early intervention. The need for early intervention has increased in the last five years vastly because of the covid era and the consequences we are now experiencing. My colleagues around the state are experiencing the same increase in the number of children who have a cognitive or learning disability, hearing, visual, speech or language impairment, autism or other health or mental health issues. These children and their families need our support.

My personal story begins as someone who benefited from early intervention services for my own two children in the 1990's. I have firsthand knowledge of how important it is to support young children and families. I can still remember how scary it was when, as a young mother, I heard people throwing out words describing my children - like developmentally delayed, possible cognitive delay and, most importantly, a term I did not know which was an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). I was scared and confused, and it was hard to get good information. I did my own research and tried to determine what my children needed. I worked hard to understand what I could expect from their schools and other organizations. I learned a child in Ohio may qualify for an Individualized Education Plan if they have a disability that impacts their ability to learn in a general education classroom. When I went to the IEP meetings for my children, I asked questions and heard what was available for them. I had access to trained professionals who worked with me to develop successful strategies for each child. Without realizing it I became my children's best advocate. I am proud to say that with some tears, lots of determination and figuring out the ways my children learn best, today my daughter is one class away from receiving her early childhood

education degree and my son has a good paying job that allows him to live comfortably. My children are just two examples of how early intervention can be the key to success.

In 2025 the same scary thoughts I had are felt by so many families trying to determine what their child needs and how to navigate a complex system. At Learning Grove, we help our families identify their children's challenges, start the intervention process and help them through screenings, assessments, evaluations and observations of the child in the classroom by identifying the services needed. Now in my role as the director I am a trained professional who supports parents as they advocate for their own child and helps them maintain hope that they will receive the interventions their child needs.

Our parents are facing a variety of roadblocks accessing what they need for their children. Some of our children have been waiting months to be evaluated for an IEP and we hope it will happen by the end of the school year. Some of our children who have approved IEPs are unable to access intervention specialists, speech therapists or mental health professionals. Resources and challenges are different for our urban, suburban and rural school districts. As an organization that works with multiple school districts, we recognize that some fail to understand how critical it is to evaluate early, develop a plan and provide targeted services. They prefer to "wait and see" approach at the very time we know intervention has the highest impact and return.

Funding in the Governor's budget will help streamline the intervention process across the state, ensure timely evaluations and provide adequate staffing in school districts to handle the increased number of children who qualify for specialized intervention services.

Thank you for keeping Ohio's children in the forefront of Ohio's spending.

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