



**Ohio House Children and Human Services Committee
House Bill 96
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Early Childhood Education Alliance
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Chairwoman White, Vice Chairwoman Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and Ohio House Children and Human Services Committee members, Thank you for the opportunity to speak today regarding House Bill 96 and the importance of quality early childhood education as it impacts the workforce. My name is Elizabeth Hibbs, and I am the Director of the Early Childhood Education Alliance—also known as ECEA.

The Early Childhood Education Alliance is a nonprofit organization created from a unique partnership between the University of Mount Union, the City of Alliance, and Alliance City Schools.

ECEA works diligently to ensure ALL children have equitable access to early childhood education and enter school ready to learn. ECEA focuses on a two-tiered approach. By supporting the parents' development and connecting them with resources, we also support the children and their development. A key component of this approach is collaboration between families and local service providers, including other non-profits, childcare centers, local businesses and community organizations.

Research shows that 90% of the brain develops by age five. Those first five years of life are important, as they will impact the rest of a child's life--good or bad. Investments in quality early childhood care and education yield a 13% return on investment. Children who have received a quality early childhood education are more likely to graduate from high school, avoid teen pregnancy, and go on to acquire a college education or become skilled in a trade. Early childhood care and education is the cornerstone of society. Early childhood services and family support programs should be part of every economic development initiative because a society that invests in early childhood education saves money while strengthening its greatest resource, its people.

ECEA's initiatives closely align with the governor's budget proposals, and we are grateful for this administration's dedication to supporting working families and children. Expanding access to affordable, high-quality childcare for families earning up to 200% of the federal poverty level and enhancing support for quality early learning experiences that ensure children are prepared for kindergarten must remain key priorities in this budget cycle.

In 2019, in collaboration with local business leaders and Alliance Area Development, ECEA began implementing the (AEP) Alliance Employment Promise. Via the AEP, participating businesses pay up to \$200 per child per month for the early care and education of their employees' children at any of the eight ECEA-supported centers of their choice, as all of the ECEA-supported centers are highly rated via Step Up to Quality system. Since its implementation, the four startup companies involved (Coastal Pet Products, Inc., MAC Trailer Manufacturing, Morgan Engineering, and Robertson Heating Supply) have served 47 children and 37 employees via the AEP. According to Jim Stout, owner of Coastal Pet Products, Inc., "This initiative not only supports working parents but also benefits companies by improving employee retention and recruitment. We are already seeing the positive impact of this program." 100% of participating Coastal Pet Products, Inc. employees have been retained.

Quality early education and care are workforce development solutions that will positively impact the workforce and community both now and for years to come. This is because quality childcare supports today's workforce while educating tomorrow's workforce. Alliance area businesses see the value of supporting their current employees, their community, and the future workforce.

As the ECEA Director, I oversee a home visiting program called SPARK in the greater Alliance area. During the 2023 SPARK home-visiting cohort, and consistently each year, children who participated in the SPARK Alliance program scored higher on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) than their non-SPARK peers in every subscale category and overall. Additionally, SPARK children were 23% more likely to meet the KRA's Language and Literacy cutoff score.

For 18 consecutive years, SPARK children have consistently outperformed their non-SPARK peers on the KRA, showing statistically significant results. Additionally, a significantly higher percentage of SPARK children score 263 or above on the Language and Literacy section. This critical benchmark predicts whether a child will be reading at grade level by third grade.

Independent evaluators monitor SPARK and comparison group children through fifth grade, gathering data on standardized test performance, special education classifications, attendance, and grade promotion. The findings indicate that SPARK's benefits extend well beyond kindergarten. SPARK children consistently outperform their non-SPARK peers in the same classrooms on third—and fifth-grade state Math and English Language Arts assessments. Additionally, SPARK students have significantly fewer absence hours than their peers.

I appreciate your time, and I thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony today. I respectfully ask that you support SPARK by keeping its funding in Ohio's budget. I also respectfully ask for expanding access to affordable, high-quality childcare for families earning up to 200% of the federal poverty level and enhancing support for quality early learning experiences that ensure children are prepared for kindergarten. Please do not hesitate to contact me directly if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

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