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**Ohio House
Finance Committee
H.B. 96
Katie Kelly, Executive Director
PRE4CLE
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Chairman Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, and Ranking Member Sweeney, and distinguished members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today. My name is Katie Kelly, and I am the Executive Director of PRE4CLE, an initiative in Cleveland that works to expand access to high-quality preschool programs and improve kindergarten readiness. I appreciate the opportunity submit this testimony regarding the proposed budget and its critical implications for Ohio's children and working families.

I want to express our deep concern over the House substitute bill, which strips away essential investments in child care and early childhood education that were proposed by Governor DeWine. These cuts threaten the well-being of families and children across Ohio.

Governor DeWine's proposed budget included key investments aimed at improving child care affordability and expanding access to high-quality early learning programs. Among these are provisions that increase eligibility for child care subsidies, allowing families up to 160% of the federal poverty level to qualify for assistance. Currently, Ohio ranks last out of all 50 states in terms of child care eligibility, leaving many working families struggling to afford quality care. However, the House version of the budget eliminates this crucial expansion, effectively removing financial support for thousands of families. **We urge you to replace the provision increasing child care eligibility for working families up to 160% of the federal poverty level.**

In addition to these cuts, the House bill also reduces funding for the Child Care Choice Voucher by \$150 million in federal funding. The Child Care Choice Voucher program was launched in 2024 to provide assistance to families up to 200% of the federal poverty level. **In Cuyahoga County alone, there are over 50,000 children living in families below this income threshold, many of whom are directly impacted by this lack of affordable child care.** To date, the Child Care Choice Voucher program has been very successful in supporting families to return to the workforce, and **we urge you to restore the \$150 million removed from the Child Care Choice Voucher program in the House bill.**

The importance of affordable and accessible child care cannot be overstated. **According to a 2023 [survey conducted in Cuyahoga County](#), 78% of parents identified child care accessibility as a barrier to work. More than 10,000 parents in the county are unemployed due to child care challenges, and over 12,000 are limited to part-time work as a result.** These figures represent a deep economic crisis that threatens the stability and growth of our region and our state.

Furthermore, the House budget also eliminates the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment, a critical tool for educators to assess children's skills and guide instruction as they enter school. **The Kindergarten Readiness Assessment is vital in understanding the effectiveness of our early learning investments and ensuring that children are ready for success in kindergarten.** In Ohio, only 36.5% of children enter school with the full set of skills needed for kindergarten, and in Cleveland, that number drops to just 18.1%. This is not only a challenge for our schools but also a challenge for the long-term success of our children and our workforce. **We ask that you remove the language eliminating the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment.**

We know that the Governor's proposed investments in child care would help alleviate these challenges, using federal funding through the Child Care and Development Block Grant and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which would not require any new state dollars until the next biennium. This is a cost-effective solution that would make a real difference in the lives of working families without putting additional strain on our state's budget.

The House budget version, however, undermines these efforts and sends a troubling message about Ohio's commitment to its children and working families. **We cannot afford to wait any longer to address the child care crisis in our state. Ohio's economic future depends on providing children with the early education and support they need to thrive, and on ensuring that parents have access to affordable care so they can contribute to our workforce.**

I urge this committee to fully restore the Governor's proposed investments in child care, including the expansion of eligibility and funding for the Child Care Choice Voucher program, as well as the continuation of the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment. Without these critical investments, Ohio will continue to fall behind in supporting its children and families, and we risk further exacerbating the economic challenges facing our communities.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to working with you to ensure that all children in Ohio have the opportunity to succeed and that all families have the support they need to thrive.