

Testimony Before the Ohio Senate Education Committee
By Kernard Jones, Senior Vice President of Government Relations, Waterford.org

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Kernard Jones, and I serve as the Senior Vice President of Government Relations for Waterford.org—a national nonprofit committed to ensuring every child enters school ready to learn.

Since 2017, Waterford has proudly served families across Ohio through our early learning program, Waterford Upstart. In those early years, we brought philanthropic dollars into the state to offer the program at no cost to families—reaching children who otherwise would have had no access to early learning opportunities.

In 2021, the Ohio Legislature allocated funding to expand our reach, with oversight provided by the Department of Job and Family Services. That support has continued through the current program year.

To date, we've served more than 3,000 Ohio four- and five-year-olds—not including the 630 children currently enrolled. Our data consistently show that children who complete the program average kindergarten beginning-level scores or higher—clear evidence of school readiness.

But what's most important is who we serve. The vast majority of our families are those who've fallen through the cracks—families who can't afford preschool or daycare, who lack transportation, or who live in rural communities without a nearby facility. We help level the playing field by delivering high-quality early education directly to the home. And for families who need it, we provide internet service and a learning device at no cost.

There is an upcoming budget amendment that would allow us to continue offering this critical support to more families across Ohio. I urge the committee to give it full consideration.

Thank you again for your time and for your commitment to Ohio's children and families.