



**Ohio Department of Children and Youth
State Fiscal Years 2026 – 2027
Testimony
April 9, 2025**

Chairman Cirino, Vice Chairman Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the committee. Thank you for your time today. It is an honor to stand before you to present the Ohio Department of Children and Youth's (DCY) Fiscal Years 2026–2027 operating budget request.

BACKGROUND

“Remember that behind every policy is a person.”

These stirring words, spoken by a brave young adult with lived experience in the children services' system, embody everything we do at the Ohio Department of Children and Youth (DCY). At a recent DCY Kids Summit in front of nearly 1,000 passionate Ohioans, she reminded us that every decision has a real-life impact — a call that fuels our commitment to truly serve Ohio's kids.

Two years ago, Governor Mike DeWine and the 135th General Assembly launched DCY with one clear mission: DO WHAT'S RIGHT FOR KIDS. This daily mantra drives our work as we listen to those most affected by our policies. Through 15 family-focused sessions held across the state, we've connected with more than 350 youth and caregivers and collaborated with 700 community stakeholders to shape policies that make a genuine difference. We offer ongoing opportunities for engagement — through bimonthly calls, surveys, and more — ensuring that every conversation and every story informs our decisions. This guarantees we have public accountability built into our everyday processes.

You may recall that we brought together programs from six state agencies, including key areas of Maternal and Infant Vitality, Early Intervention, Home Visiting, Early Care and Education, and Children Services, to better meet the needs of Ohio's children. Our goal was to break down silos and streamline bureaucracy so that every decision is driven by real stories and real needs reinforced with transparent data and program accountability. After all, our focus isn't on individual programs—it's on achieving better outcomes.



At DCY, we never lose sight of the faces behind the figures — because every policy, at its core, is about a person.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

DCY has already made significant progress in both efficiency and accountability.

Data Sharing:

By integrating data across two previously separate programs, in our first year we connected more than 150 of our youngest and most vulnerable children — those who through no fault of their own find themselves in the child protection system — with essential early childhood education programming. This initiative provides support to preschoolers during a very critical time when they need a stable, safe, and healthy place to grow. This also supports those caregivers suddenly tasked with raising young children experiencing trauma.

Early Intervention (EI Exiter) Pilot:

Recognizing a critical gap in support for young children transitioning from Early Intervention, SFY 24, we launched a transformative pilot program aimed at ensuring nearly 1,500 vulnerable young learners didn't fall through the cracks. While Early Intervention expertly addresses developmental delays, many children who don't qualify for Preschool Special Education have been left without the ongoing support they need and deserve. To change this narrative, we expanded access to high-quality preschool education in four counties — Cuyahoga, Lorain, Noble, and Belmont. This innovative initiative prioritizes these at-risk children, providing them with a minimum 12.5 hours per week of enriching, structured learning. By bridging the gap between developmental and educational support, our pilot is not only opening doors to early learning opportunities but also setting the stage for a lifetime of academic and personal success.

Early Identification/Parent Support:

We have revolutionized our Central Intake System, expanding support from birth to five years old to ensure that no child slips through the cracks of outdated bureaucracy. By doing so, we ensure that every child has access to the vital resources necessary to enter kindergarten fully-prepared and ready to succeed. Moreover, our groundbreaking app-based screening tool now empowers parents to quickly and easily assess their child's development. Launched in September, this screening tool reached more families in its first five and a half weeks than it did in the entire previous year. Since expanding the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) to



preschool-aged children, over 3,400 children aged three to five have been screened with nearly 140 resulting in a connection for Preschool Special Education — an achievement that was simply not available before DCY's proactive involvement. Together, these initiatives are forging a seamless network of early support that is transforming the lives of our youngest learners and setting them on a path toward lifelong success.

Cross-Training and Staffing Efficiencies:

In a decisive move to safeguard our children's well-being, we cross-trained our child care regulatory and monitoring teams that once operated under separate state departments. This unified strategy enabled us to perform unannounced inspections at all 8,600 licensed child care programs in Ohio, ensuring that every facility consistently meets the highest standards of health and safety. At the same time, we eliminated a \$300,000 annual staffing contract — one that was set for expansion before DCY's creation — demonstrating our relentless commitment to operational efficiency. This bold reorganization not only reinforces our protective oversight but also ensures that every dollar is reinvested into the safety and quality of care for our children.

Maternal and Infant Wellness:

We partnered with 26 Pregnancy Resource Centers all around the state and provided them with high-quality ultrasound machines, technical support, and a requirement to provide these expectant moms with a warm hand-off to prenatal care. This strategy has already served more than 15,000 Ohio women. One center remarked, "Our sonographers are raving about the image quality and how much better they can see early babies!"

Placement Crisis:

In response to reports of children sleeping in county agency lobbies, we formed a Children Services Placement Workgroup to address both short-term and long-term challenges. In the short term, our team developed a technology solution to assist with finding placements, established a funding opportunity to reopen congregate care beds and better support foster parents, leveraged telehealth to ensure youth have access to mental health support, and committed to reviewing more than 270 cases of children placed in congregate care for over two years. In November 2023, 273 children and youth were identified as long-term congregate care cases; by mid-March 2025, five review waves have resulted in 61 percent of these children transitioning to less restrictive placements or returning home. This approach reduces trauma for the child, strengthens family connections, reduces costs, and helps free up resources to address other critical needs serving the child protective system.



Treatment Foster Home Pilot:

As announced in the Governor's 2024 State of the State Address we have embarked on a Treatment Foster Home Pilot program—an initiative inspired by the success of the Northwest Treatment Foster Care Partnership in Sandusky, Seneca, Wyandot, and Ottawa counties. This forward-thinking program is dedicated to recruiting and supporting treatment foster homes that provide a nurturing, stable environment for children and youth with higher needs. By offering one-on-one family support, around-the-clock access to caseworkers and crisis counseling, and specialized training for foster parents, we ensure that children facing complex behavioral or mental health challenges can remain safely at home, rather than being placed in institutional settings.

The results speak for themselves: eight new counties have joined our pilot, expanding our reach to 42 counties and forming 11 statewide partnerships, resulting in 31 youth now successfully placed in caring environments. It is estimated that these placements will save approximately \$100,000 per child based on current rates of treatment foster care and congregate care rates. This program is transforming lives and demonstrating the powerful impact of community-based support. To date, the pilot has recruited almost 30 additional foster families, 15 of which have become fully certified. Together, we are proving that with the right resources and commitment, every child deserves the chance to thrive in a loving home.

PRIORITIES & INVESTMENTS

The Governor's vision is clear: Ohio should be the best place to have and raise a family. To turn this vision into reality, our Department is laser-focused on transforming child outcomes with three strategic goals that guide every investment and initiative we undertake.

Goal 1 – Reducing Infant Mortality

We are committed to making Ohio a national leader in protecting babies and mothers to be one of the top 10 states in infant care. We aren't just launching isolated programs; we're building robust community partnerships and providing comprehensive, continuous support before and after birth. By empowering parents with vital education on environmental and behavioral risks, we aim to save an additional 300 precious lives annually.

For too long, Ohio ranked poorly in infant mortality — most recently at 43rd in the nation—and we refuse to accept that status quo. Our groundbreaking Partner for Change grant with



Cradle Cincinnati seeks to build upon their incredible progress that has already reduced infant mortality in Hamilton County through deep community collaboration and, most importantly, by listening to moms. Ohio's preliminary 2024 data show a promising decline to an infant mortality rate of 6.6 down from 7.1—the lowest rate in years.

To build on this success, we are requesting additional investment to expand community and faith-based grants, enhance parenting and pregnancy supports and further expand our evidenced-based home visiting programs. Ohio's home visiting models are tailored to meet community-specific needs. We're also expanding Family Connects Ohio from 11 to 88 counties, ensuring every new Ohio family benefits from a free, personalized home visit by a Registered Nurse who offers expert guidance, resources, and critical community connections. Family Connects meets moms and babies where they are, when they need it with a tiered approach.

Goal 2 – Increasing Access to Early Care and Education

Since 2019, with unwavering support from the Governor, we have dramatically expanded access to state child care, setting the stage for lasting educational and economic success for Ohio families. In April, we unveiled the largest expansion to date — the Child Care Choice Voucher Program — which now supports families earning up to 200% of the federal poverty level. This means that a working family of four earning up to \$62,000 annually can receive assistance to secure quality child care while they pursue career opportunities.

In just under a year, this program has connected more than 5,300 families to the workforce and provided an additional 8,000 children with high-quality early learning and enrichment — laying a strong foundation for kindergarten readiness. The impact is clear from the voices of the families we serve:

- **85% of parents** say the program “**helps them be at school or work for longer hours or more often.**”
- **60% of parents** share that they “**worry less about my child's safety when I am not with them.**”
- **Over half of parents** report that these programs “**better prepare my child for school.**”



- One parent described the voucher as **“life changing...it allows me to produce income to feed my children and ensure they’re clothed and housed...this program is a blessing to Ohio families.”**
- Another parent observed, **“If it weren’t for this program, my child care cost would be over half of my income monthly.”**

But our commitment doesn’t stop there. We have also streamlined the quality rating system to reduce administrative burdens while driving better outcomes. From SFY 23 to SFY 24, we increased our family child care supply by welcoming more than 100 new in-home child care providers through targeted Access Grants and mentoring. We also created over 5,000 new child care slots by leveraging \$85 million in Access Grants alongside \$30 million in Infant/Toddler Infrastructure grants. And by unifying the application process across early care and education programs, we have eliminated duplication and opened one welcoming front door for every family.

Together, these strategic initiatives are not only expanding access to quality child care — they are empowering families, boosting workforce participation, and ensuring every child is better prepared to succeed in school and beyond.

Safe, affordable, and reliable child care is not just babysitting — it’s a cornerstone of family stability and economic opportunity. Today, 44 percent of parents report work disruptions due to child care challenges, with 49 percent cutting back on work hours to care for their children. In fact, more than 60 percent of Ohio moms with children five and younger who are not currently working or are working part-time say they would go back to work or work more hours if they had access to high quality, affordable child care.

At a time when Ohio is losing members of its workforce due to child care challenges, fewer children are prepared when they enter school. Shockingly, only one in three Ohio children is kindergarten-ready, and for non-white children, that number drops to fewer than one in five.

Our bold strategy supports families earning up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level through the continuation of the successful Child Care Choice Voucher Program so they can work to provide for their children. In addition, we are capping family copayments for those in our publicly funded child care program at 7 percent of income—saving a working family of four almost \$8 per hour, and thereby making work pay.



We are also providing child care programs with evidence-based curriculum aligned with the Science of Reading to ensure Ohio children can enter kindergarten prepared and ready to learn. We know it is critically important to gauge a child's readiness to fully engage in the kindergarten curriculum. The Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) is important because it is a strong predictor of school readiness and later academic success. As a result of your support of the SSID (Single Student Identifier), the state has been able to use the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment to evaluate the program impacts from Early Childhood Education grants, Preschool Special Education programming, and Publicly Funded Child Care from two external evaluations on indicators of child care health, safety, and quality on kindergarten readiness. This data is what informed and directed decisions to streamline programming, create administrative efficiency, and better connect community resources. The KRA is a measure that can reliably evaluate our early childhood education ongoing investments, supporting DCY's commitment to accountability and transparency.

We anticipate that these investments will increase Ohio's readiness rates from 36 percent to 60 percent over the next two years and enable an estimated 25,000 families to go back to school or work or increase their work hours. In addition, we are investing in child care programs by increasing rates to the 2024 market rate, a much-needed adjustment given the years of high inflation.

To fuel this transformation, we are requesting spending authority for this biennium to maximize existing federal funds.

Early Intervention

Additionally, to better support and reinforce early identification and literacy, DCY is requesting additional funding over the biennium to continue expansion of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library of Ohio and to support more children being served through Early Intervention. Dolly Parton's Imagination Library of Ohio currently serves 62 percent of Ohio's children age birth to five by sending a book directly to their home each month. Over the last year, DCY has worked to ensure children in foster care are enrolled to ensure they receive mail with their name on it, even at a time when everything else may feel different and uncertain. To date more than 5,200 children in foster care have been enrolled. A 2023 report stated that nearly four in five children enrolled in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library are reading with their parents more after receiving the books and about 90 percent of respondents believe their children are better prepared for kindergarten as a result of participation.



Early Intervention served an additional 1,100 children last year and has proven long-term impact on school readiness, and the need for future interventions with one out of every three children served no longer needing further specialized services when they enter kindergarten.

Goal 3 – Reducing the Foster Care Entry Rate

Building on Governor DeWine’s Children’s Services Transformation, we are intensifying our efforts to preserve families and support kinship and adoption services. By engaging families proactively —addressing concerns when they are a question not a crisis — we plan to keep more than 3,300 children safely in their homes. Between December 31, 2019, and December 31, 2024, we reduced the total number of children in the children services system from 16,455 to 14,213 — our lowest level since 2016. Yet, the number of children in congregate care remains stubbornly high at over 2,000, representing the most vulnerable and expensive cases in our child protective system, with costs surging over 50 percent in the last biennium.

To tackle these challenges head-on, we are requesting funding to establish regional Child Wellness Campuses that provide timely, localized support to children in crisis; and increased investment for the state child protection allocation, along with statutory reforms to streamline procurement processes for greater efficiency, transparency, and cost containment.

Together, these priorities and investments form a bold roadmap to secure a brighter future for every child and family in Ohio. We are not only addressing today’s challenges; we are forging a legacy of resilience, opportunity, and hope for generations to come.

CLOSING

At DCY, we’ve taken the call to “DO WHAT’S RIGHT FOR KIDS” to heart — because we know that behind every policy is a child who needs us all to do better. Our accomplishments — from life-changing data-sharing breakthroughs to pilots that bridge critical gaps — prove that when we listen to real stories, break down bureaucratic silos, and demand data and accountability, our actions transform lives. Our goals are more than targets: they are our commitment to every Ohioan to reduce infant mortality, expand access to affordable, quality early care and education, and keep more children safely at home.



I am immensely proud of the hundreds of DCY employees who show up every day to fulfill Governor DeWine's vision. I am grateful to our partners who have worked with us to identify and make change at the frontline and program levels. I am honored by the collaboration with many of you on this panel and in the General Assembly who share this passion for our children. And I am proud of all that we have accomplished together in just over 18 months on behalf of Ohio's children and youth. Alone, this work can feel insurmountable and overwhelming. But together, I am hopeful and invigorated by the work ahead — as outlined in the Governor's SFY 26-27 state budget submission — and I look forward to working with you to continue DOING WHAT'S RIGHT FOR KIDS.