



United Way
of Central Ohio

**Interested Party Testimony- Senate Finance Committee
HB 96 — FY26-27 State Operating Budget
May 28th, 2025**

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson and members of the Senate Finance Committee — Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on House Bill 96 in support of the United Way Collaborative's funding request which would appropriate **\$2M per fiscal year through the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce Program and Project Support line for the United Way Collaborative** to expand implementation of the evidence-based Success By Third Grade Program and other related proven early childhood education initiatives, collaborate with schools, community organizations, and other entities to achieve a measurable impact on student achievement including implementing programs that focus on improved family stability.

I am Dr. Lisa Courtice, President & CEO, of United Way of Central Ohio. I am honored to be joined by colleague Kerry Pedraza, Executive Director of United Way of Clark, Champaign & Madison Counties.

In the last biennium, the United Way Collaborative received \$3.2M to improve student achievement and family stability in our region. The United Way Collaborative is made up of six United Ways supporting 10 counties in Ohio — Franklin, Fairfield, Union, Delaware, Clark, Champaign, Madison, Muskingum, Perry and Morgan Counties. Our goal is to expand successful programs like Success by Third Grade to improve student achievement, while collaborating with schools, community organizations, and other partners to enhance academic performance, attendance, and reduce discipline issues. Our focus is placed on case management initiatives that strengthen family stability and positively impact both academic and non-academic outcomes for children. Additionally, we build local capacity to sustain partnerships and ensure ongoing access to essential community resources.

I am thrilled to share that each United Way has made a truly incredible impact within their respective communities through a wide range of programs that were thoughtfully tailored to address the unique needs of the people they serve. These efforts include the delivery of tens of thousands of meals to individuals and families in need, ensuring that no one goes hungry, as well as providing thousands of nights of safe shelter for community members, offering a secure place to stay during difficult times. As you know, children must have food and shelter to be successful in school. In addition, there have been notable improvements in early childhood education, such as enhanced achievements in kindergarten readiness and third grade reading proficiency, which are crucial for laying the foundation for future success. On top of that, millions of dollars have been returned directly to the community through tax refunds, putting more money in the hands of those who need it most. Furthermore, thousands of books have been distributed to children from

birth to age 5 through the Imagination Library, fostering a love for reading and ensuring that young learners are set up for success. And this is just the beginning—there is so much more that United Way has done to strengthen and uplift communities, making a lasting difference in the lives of countless individuals.

In Franklin County, third grade reading scores have consistently fallen below state averages, and experts point to non-academic barriers as a significant factor contributing to these disparities. Many students face challenges such as food insecurity, lack of safe and stable housing, adverse health effects of poverty, including stress and limited access to healthcare, and limited access to the necessary support and services, such as tutoring, mental health resources, and after-school programs. These interconnected issues create significant obstacles to reading proficiency, making it more difficult for students to reach their full potential. Success by Third Grade uses a collective strategy approach that brings together families, nonprofits, local governments, and school districts to tackle the non-academic barriers that affect literacy for K-3 students. By following a proven collective impact model, United Way and its partners work collaboratively to connect students with essential resources that address a wide range of challenges, including chronic absenteeism, mental health, hygiene needs, out-of-school interventions, and many other obstacles children face. The program's goal is to improve reading proficiency, as being able to read at grade level by third grade is a critical predictor of future success, both in school and later in life within the workforce.

We are partnering with the six Franklin County school districts with the greatest opportunity for reading improvement—when we started 54% of third graders in these districts did not score proficient on the state assessment. Thanks to the state's investment I am pleased to share that five and the six school districts improved reading proficiency as measured by the state assessment, this past school year. For this school year, assessments take place later this spring.

As you can see, the funding from the last biennium has led to significant positive outcomes. We are hopeful for continued support so that we can build on this success and keep making meaningful improvements in our communities.

I kindly ask for your support for our funding request.

Dr. Lisa Courtice
President & CEO
United Way of Central Ohio