

NeFree Cook
Still Sarah's Village Learning Center
June 6, 2025
Testimony on *Sub Bill* House Bill 96

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee,

My name is NeFree Cook and I work in the Bronze medaled Still Sarah's Village Learning Center, named after our founder and my Aunt Sarah Chancellor. I also proudly represent the CEO Project. I am here to ask that you support Ohioans by supporting the workforce behind the workforce; and that you take action to fund Ohio's antiquated childcare system.

That workforce consists of Ohio children, families, and childcare providers. There isn't one of us as Ohioans who goes unaffected by the care of, educating of, support of, or lack thereof as it relates to childcare. So we MUST fund.

As a childcare provider in Hamilton County, I understand the importance of making this journey from Cincinnati in order to stand before you today. I stand here as the voice for our children, for the babies who cannot express their needs but we recognize them nonetheless from the last diaper we sent them home in the night before..... and so quietly and silently the teacher makes a mental note to send diapers home ...or the toddler who is always happy in the morning but came in whiny and cranky because they are hungry and so silently and quietly the teacher makes a mental note to send some extra food and snacks homeor the school ager embarrassed by the holes in his shoes so he doesn't want to go outside to play, so silently and quietly the teacher makes a mental note to take up a collection in order to purchase new shoes

Silently and quietly is how educators across the State of Ohio have been forced to care for our children, to meet their needs, to uplift families but at a cost. So now I stand before you because the time has come to become Noisy and Loud. We need your help. I have been in early childhood education in some capacity since 2008. We love our children and we love what we do but we are also running small businesses, businesses that deserve protections. You cannot do our work without caring, caring inherently brings quality when doing what you love. So much of the magic and the work that we do goes unsung. But no business in Ohio should be subjected to the perils of losing your business because no due process exists. No one should lose their business due to the vagueness of rules, the ambiguity of rules, the difference in interpretation of rules, nor the vast disparity in how Licensing specialists determine and write up violations from the rules. You definitely should not lose your business over \$312. My ask is that you add the Peer

Review Appeal Process back into the budget. This is the only way to protect the illegal targeting and closure of much needed early childhood centers across Ohio and bring fairness and equity to the Licensing Department. These Centers are saving lives.

Peer Review Appeal Process:

In the substitute version of the bill the **Peer Review Appeal Process** language was removed and I am here to ask that you reinstate that language. As a childcare provider we are inspected to make sure that we are providing a safe and regulated environment for the children we care for. This is something we all take very seriously, not only because we believe in caring for our children but also because our license depends on it. Some inspection processes are inconsistent and leave us more confused instead of guided toward improvement.

Every business should have the right to appeal a bureaucratic punitive system. The vast majority of violations are not dealing with safety issues but instead are infractions related to sanitation, record keeping and documentation issues and the like.

This peer review process allows other small businesses who are experts in the field to be involved in the compliance process instead of only having a system run solely by individuals that have never been in the real world of job creation. When small business childcare providers lose their Step Up To Quality rating they lose real dollars. This is a serious matter for small businesses and we want a serious appeals process in place.

By doing these things I have mentioned, I believe that we will no longer be last as a state in childcare funding.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.