

Ohio House of Representatives
Families, Aging & Human Services Committee
House Bill 145
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Chairman Manchester, Vice Chair Cutrona, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the committee, my name is Carla Adams and I am providing testimony today on my own behalf. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on House Bill 145, which would expand access to publicly funded child care.

The pandemic brought light and more attention to the value, need, and the stark reality just how underfunded and inaccessible state early childhood programs are across the state and nation. Everyone at the table- children, families, providers, and the state- would benefit when we agree that additional funding is a necessity, not a luxury. Child care is a vital infrastructure that the state cannot afford to lose.

Increasing publicly funded child care (PFCC) eligibility will allow families to gain access to high quality program, allow programs to receive better reimbursement rates to survive, and increase positive child outcomes for the state for years to come. I have had the pleasure of working in the early childhood field for the past 12 years in many facets. I have been a toddler teacher, preschool teacher, private child care administrator, a Head Start Manager, and currently a Regional Director for an agency that serves 2,288 children and families in Columbus, OH. I am not only a voice for those families, but for our 256 center staff and home visitors.

Prenatal to 5 is THE most crucial time in a child's development. This when the groundwork is laid for their lifetime. When we have cracks in that foundation, it not only impacts that child and family, but also the state in the long run. Frederick Douglass' words have never hit harder by saying, "It is easier to build strong children than repair broken men". It is time Ohio starts being proactive, instead of reactive. In fact, by providing high-quality early childhood education for Ohio's most at-risk children during the most critical period of their development delivers upwards of 13% return on investment per year.

Early Childhood Programs are slowly moving towards the endangered business list. Between the rise in childcare deserts and the nationwide staffing crisis, it won't be long until we are extinct. It is a hard balancing act for child care owners and business to come to grips with. They have a passion and drive for the work, but also have to make rent, pay bills, and feed their families. Teachers and providers are burnt out and barely making ends meet. This causing them to leave the field and never look back. As businesses, we look to triage the situations, but sometimes it does more harm than good. This past year, our agency was awarded Quality Improvement Funds from the Office of Head Start. We knew our Teacher Assistant salaries needed much attention to bring them closer to a livable wage and combat losing more staff to "making more money somewhere else". Our Teacher Assistants (TAs) with a CDA credential hourly rates went from \$11.57 to \$13.57. Many would see this as a huge benefit; however, to some it made life so much harder. With the current PFCC eligibility guidelines, one of our staff members no longer qualifies for their initial PFCC, resulting in her to be considered 'private pay' for one of our centers. You might be thinking, "No problem, she just got a raise and can afford it," right? Let's look at the numbers... A forty-hour work week totals her gross weekly pay to \$542.80. Our agency's private pay rate for preschool is \$230.97/week, leaving the staff person \$311.83 BEFORE taxes, insurance, and other deductions. This is also a staff person that works year round. TAs in our school year program prorate their

pay for their off weeks in the summer and only bring home \$438.41/week before taxes, insurance and other deductibles. The raise we provided to bring our staff to bring them closer to a livable wage has now crippled this mom and likely many others. Does she pay rent, fill up her gas tank, or feed her family? More than likely she'll leave the workforce because it's not worth it. Each time the Office of Head Start approves a cost of living allocation, I get excited because it will bring many of our staff closer to earning a livable wage. However, then the pit in my stomach opens because I know for many staff, this slight increase in their wage will likely result in losing their child care assistance. It happens too often and the solution is right in front of us.

By expanding PFCC eligibility, more at risk families will have equitable access to high-quality services that build in comprehensive services, focusing on the whole child and family. One of the greatest reasons why Head Start is important for me is because the program aims to support families in becoming self-sufficient and breaking the cycle of poverty. It's almost impossible to break that cycle when families are set up for failure from the beginning. At Head Start, we work with parents to obtain employment. Our staff helps with applications, interview skills, child care and more. They land the job, start working (because you must have proof of a qualifying activity), and suddenly they make too much to qualify for PFCC and no longer qualify for our full day program. Those conversations with families have been the worst experiences of my career. It breaks me down a little further each time and there is no excuse for it to continue to happen.

The pandemic has shown early childhood programs- whether it be center-based, a family childcare, Head Start or home visiting- are ESSENTIAL not just to the state economy and workforce, but to growing and developing our youngest citizens... not just for their future, but for OUR future. Early childhood education programs want to put in the work, we want to see children and families thrive, we want the state to be successful. We will lay the groundwork and keep the infrastructure alive, but we and the families we serve need to be seen, heard, and helped.

For all the reasons stated above, I am respectfully urging you to consider expanding initial eligibility for the publicly funded child care subsidy from 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) to 200% of the FPL as provided in HB 145. The pandemic has made clear now more than ever that if we want and need to have a thriving economy, we need increased access to quality child care so that parents and caregivers can return to work and stay on the job. Now is the time for us to double down on our commitment to Ohio's youngest and most vulnerable children, as well as the families who support them. The Ohio General Assembly has the opportunity to keep Ohioans working and businesses operating, help families break out of poverty, and ensure more Ohio children have access to high-quality early learning by expanding access to quality and affordable child care.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony today and please do not hesitate to reach out to me directly if you have any questions.