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**Ohio House of Representatives  
Finance Committee on Primary and Secondary Education  
House Bill 110  
Lynanne Gutierrez  
Groundwork Ohio  
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Chairman Richardson, Ranking Member Troy and members of the committee, my name is Lynanne Gutierrez and I am the Assistant Director at Groundwork Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on House Bill 110, Ohio's FY 2022-2023 budget bill as it relates to invited testimony today from the Ohio Department of Education (ODE).

As you may know, Groundwork is a statewide, nonpartisan advocacy organization that champions high-quality early learning and healthy development strategies from the prenatal period to age five, that lay a strong foundation for Ohio kids, families and communities. Our vision is to make Ohio the best place to be a young child so that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential. Groundwork is led by Executive Director, Shannon Jones, and governed by a robust steering committee of child-focused health and education experts from across the state.

Groundwork is testifying today as an interested party to House Bill 110 to both express continued support for the maintenance of state funds in ODE's publicly funded preschool program (Line Item 200408, Early Childhood Education Grants, Line Item 200442 Child Care Licensing) and the Department's ongoing commitment to expand access to quality early learning experiences but, more importantly, inspire a deeper conversation on early childhood education. In light of the toll of the once-in-a-lifetime COVID-19 pandemic has taken on our most vulnerable children, as you deliberate the ODE budget and related legislation, we ask that you thoughtfully consider how to recognize and expand the critical role Ohio's early childhood system must play in meeting the needs of children alongside K-12 school districts.

Not only does the COVID-19 pandemic happen once in a lifetime, so does childhood. Our youngest children have a short, five-year period of critical brain development happening in the earliest years of their life to benefit from the love, care and learning they need to support their lifelong success. We often talk about the first 1,000 days setting the foundation for the rest of a child's life in recognition of over 80% of brain development happening in the first three years and 90% in the first five years of life. Ohio's most vulnerable infants and toddlers have now spent a third of these precious 1000 days in this pandemic, enduring the stress, trauma and financial realities experienced by their families, caregivers and communities which deeply impacts their development.

Even prior to COVID-19, we know that low-income children are up to two years behind their higher income peers when they enter the kindergarten classroom and only 41% of Ohio kids were coming to the classroom ready to learn. This number is far lower for low-income students and Black students. These children don't just start behind, they stay behind as national and state research have verified that kindergarten readiness is a predictor of third grade reading proficiency, 8<sup>th</sup> grade math proficiency, high school graduation and postsecondary attainment. We have also investigated and affirmed how these gaps at kindergarten persist over a child's academic career in Ohio. Given this background, when reviewing the Ohio Department of Education's most recent report, *Data Insights: How the Pandemic is Affecting the 2020-2021 School Year* we are alarmed by the following urgent concerns for these children:

- Kindergarten Readiness Assessment:

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- Only 78% of enrolled kindergarten students completed the KRA (compared to 93% in 2019). The students who did not, were more likely to be students with disabilities, English learners, economically disadvantaged or non-white. There were 30% fewer Black students and 18% fewer low-income students who took the test.
- Even among those who took the assessment, 47.6% of the students scored not on track (up from 2019 where 29.7% were not on track) for Ohio's Third Grade Reading Guarantee.
- A higher percentage of children taking the KRA scored in the lowest performance level, *Emerging Readiness*, than in any previous year (23.7% compared to 22.5% in 2019).
- Enrollment & Attendance:
  - Among all public districts, preschool and kindergarten enrollment is down in 2020-2021 with the decrease being greatest among districts that began the year fully remote.
  - Of those who are enrolled, students across the board are experiencing lower attendance and higher levels of chronic absenteeism, but particularly in urban elementary schools. Additionally, racial gaps are widening substantially in chronic absenteeism.

As you deliberate the budget with ODE, school districts and K-12 school districts with the shared goal of meeting the needs of students recovering from the significant losses they have sustained over the past year, we ask you to consider the incredible opportunity that our early childhood birth-to-five education system provides to support this monumental task. All too often considered separately, our early childhood system is inextricably linked to the K-12 school system. High quality early childhood education holds the promise of narrowing gaps we see when children enter the public school system. This is supported by an indisputable body of national evidence fortified by Ohio's own validation studies of our quality early childhood system and being proven year in and out in our local communities that have invested their own dollars into quality child care and preschool.

Additionally, while the K-12 school districts will do their best to ensure each grade has a viable and starts-aligned curriculum and plan for intensified intervention, any intervention still occurs *in addition to* grade-level instruction. It is no surprise then, that even the highest-performing school districts across the county and in our state only achieve on average 1-1.25 years of growth during a single school year—that is what they were built to do. Accordingly, it is unrealistic to expect that the K-12 system can bear this burden alone. **A coordinated upstream approach to closing gaps where they begin, in those earliest years prior to kindergarten during the most critical period of brain development, is a requisite part of any plan to narrow the gaps we see now and will continue to see as our most challenged students return to school, are assessed and enter the Kindergarten classroom next year and five years from now.**

This promise must be realized in this crisis as we come to fully understand and anticipate the vast disparities that have widened during this pandemic, not just in this school year but long in the future. Additionally, child care *is* the school day for our youngest children and for our school children is *already* an extended school day where they are supported before and after school and through summer programming. Accordingly, as additional federal money is invested to support students catching up and you work to improve the school funding system, please consider how we our birth-to-five systems can support our K-12 system by recognizing the critical role and reliance upon the early childhood system to solve the problem before us. While this connection is acknowledged in the Department of Education's data report referenced earlier, realizing the opportunity will take intentionality, accountability and additional resources.

We assure you that, as has been demonstrated throughout this pandemic since the earliest days when our child care programs remained open when all schools were closed, against all odds, our heroic early childhood educators stand ready for the task. Their skills, passion and expertise are needed now more than ever. With your leadership during this budget process, our state has a unique opportunity to strengthen the early childhood and K-12 systems as partners in meeting the growing needs of our students from birth to high school graduation. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and please allow Groundwork Ohio and our partners across the state to support your work as we continue this conversation.