



**State Representative Teresa Fedor  
State Representative Thomas E. West**

**December 4, 2018**

**H.J.R. 15: Require free universal preschool education  
Sponsor Testimony (as prepared)**

### **Fedor**

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Slaby, my fellow members of the Education and Career Readiness Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am here to ask that you pass House Joint Resolution 15, and give all of Ohio's children access to a preschool education.

HJR 15 is a resolution that proposes an amendment to the Ohio Constitution establishing a free, voluntary preschool program for every four-and-five-year-old child residing in Ohio. Ohioans will vote on whether the General Assembly should establish a fund that "addresses and enhances each child's ability to make age appropriate progress in an age appropriate range of settings." Implemented by the 2019-2020 school year upon passage, this program would be free and open to any child within these age ranges living in the state who has not already enrolled in kindergarten.

The National Institute for Early Education Research, or NIEER (based at Rutgers University), has conducted an annual State of Preschool report since 2002. According to their most recent report, Ohio ranks 27<sup>th</sup> out of 43 states on spending for preschoolers and 36<sup>th</sup> for overall spending. While the national average per student is \$5,000, Ohio spends \$4,000 on average per student enrolled in pre-K.

The Brookings Institution, a nonprofit public policy organization (based in Washington D.C.), released a report titled "The Current State of Scientific Knowledge on Pre-Kindergarten Effects." It summarized the consensus on the state of scientific knowledge on pre-K. These findings demonstrated convincing evidence that children attending a diverse array of state and school district pre-k programs are more ready for school at the end of their pre-k year than children who do not attend pre-k.

What does this all mean? That preschool improves a child's opportunity for success throughout life and that Ohio is behind in facilitating that opportunity for them and Ohio's economic success. Ohio will be a destination state to live and to raise a family. It is an economic game changer every way you consider this bold move.

In their report, “What Difference Are We Making? An Assessment of the State of Early Learning in Ohio,” the Ohio Business Roundtable (BRT) said it best: Ohio is moving the needle, but not fast enough. “Progress is being made on metrics, access, program quality and professional development. For example:

- At the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year, 40% of kindergartners were ready for kindergarten-level instruction (Demonstrating Readiness), which was only incrementally better than the results back in 2010. Recent data have not budged the roughly 23% who entered kindergarten not ready for school (Emerging in Readiness). Children living in economically disadvantaged families are three times more likely to be ‘Emerging in Readiness’ than are children in families with higher incomes.

- State and federal investments over the last six years backfilled recession-period cuts, but have shown only modest growth during the past four years.

- After substantial enrollment increases in 2011 and 2012, home-visiting enrollment for prenatal women and infants has leveled off. While applauding some progress, the state’s incremental pace in backing early-learning services is not keeping pace with the need. Significant state investments are needed now to expand and sustain gains for our youngest children.

It is time to “go bold.” Business decision-makers know when addressing chronic and emerging challenges means moving from research and development – and from incremental progress – to a full scale roll-out. For those who lead the state of Ohio, this is that time. Ohio must make significantly larger investments in proven early-learning services to provide access for those who need them – when they need them.

Steely intention is required to muster the resources needed to expand the capacity of needed programs serving pregnancy through third-grade to achieve the kinds of ambitious results needed to move Ohio’s economic needle. The value of earlier interventions and home visiting must be harnessed, even for hard-to reach populations and in geographic areas facing capacity challenges.

Access to a quality preschool experience should become the childhood norm. Leaving four-year-olds behind simply shifts the burden to kindergarten and later grades. Playing a waiting game is akin to not playing at all for another generation. Our children can’t wait.

Ohioans grasp the sobering implications of the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment and of the seriousness of infant mortality rates and addiction statistics. Ohio’s citizens – and its business leaders – understand that much more needs to be done to ensure that, by 2025, 90% of Ohio children entering school will be ready to succeed.

Convinced that Ohio’s current economic realities cannot be an excuse for doing nothing – or for backing away from action on behalf of young children – the Roundtable calls for a greater sense of urgency – for three actions to move the state’s early-care and school readiness agenda forward:

1. Fast-track significant state investment to take proven home-visiting and pre-kindergarten programs to scale
2. Relentlessly pursue quality programs – such as the Step Up To Quality system – that make a difference.
3. Strengthen leadership, giving it authority to sustain effective cross-agency decision making.”<sup>1</sup>

HJR 15 responds to Ohio’s need for support, a need recognized by the Ohio Business Roundtable. I agree that now is the time to make a bold move. This year, Sinclair Community College, in an effort to support parents in their pursuit of higher education, announced a new program offering subsidized on-site child care to low-income parent-students.

“Recent studies have shown that a lack of access to quality child care in one of the largest barriers to parents entering the workforce or pursuing further education. When child care is hard to find or afford, women are the most likely to abandon education plans or drop out of the workforce to take care of the kids. For a single mother of two in Ohio living at 200% of the federal poverty level, child care would be more expensive than the annual cost of tuition at Sinclair Community College, making it nearly impossible to continue pursuing higher education. But when parents do have access to quality care, studies show that they are more likely to re-enter the workforce, work more hours, and increase their lifetime earnings significantly.”<sup>2</sup>

HJR 15 is a game-changer and our chance to let voters decide on making a critical investment in our greatest contributors to Ohio’s future: our children. The research and support from the Ohio Business Roundtable is an indicator that HJR 15 is the right move. Because states around the country have already taken this necessary step, Ohio’s lawmakers won’t need to reinvent the wheel and can leverage best practices to develop the best funding model for this state. With estimates that HJR could result in an additional \$2,020 per pupil, Ohio would exceed national averages. HJR 15 is an important and necessary step for Ohio to become a national leader in growing the problem-solvers and innovators of tomorrow.

I am hopeful about this legislation that guarantees preschool access. Thank you for your time and the opportunity to speak. I ask for your support moving forward in the fight for preschool access for all Ohio’s children.

I am happy to take questions from the committee.

## **West**

Finally, we see education as the great equalizer in society. If a child’s education is considered to be a marathon, then it is imperative that each student begins the race at a fair starting line to ensure they have an equal chance to succeed. In the U.S., however, where children start and their eventual educational success, can often be predicted by their race and socioeconomic status.

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<sup>1</sup> Ohio Business Roundtable. “What Difference Are We Making? An Assessment of the State of Early Learning in Ohio.” October, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Groundwork Ohio. “The Effects of Quality Child Care on Parents.” October 26, 2018.

A child's experiences in the first three years of their lives have great impact on their brain development. The brain creates 1 million connections every second that lay the pathways for future development. When children do not have opportunities to create those connections, they have gaps in their development which continue throughout their childhood and affect their eventual education achievement and life outcomes.

Ohio's state budget for 2018- 2019 allocated \$66.7 million for early childhood education, while we spent \$1.3 billion on prisons in 2015 alone. More than 300,000 students could be sent to a quality preschool with that much money. We should be investing in early childhood education, not funding prisons. We as lawmakers need to ensure that each student has access to an effective starting position in their life by providing high-quality early learning opportunities.

The money we would be spending on providing universal preschool to four and five year olds in our state is an investment, paying off later in their lives when there is more productivity, lower incarceration rates, less violence and the alleviation of intergenerational poverty.

Let's fund preschools and Head Start programs, not prisons.

Thank you for your time. We look forward to any questions the committee may have.