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**Ohio Senate
Finance Committee
Senate Bill 246
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Good Afternoon, Chairman Oelslager, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Skindell and members of the committee. I am Lynanne Gutierrez, Policy and Advocacy Associate at Groundwork Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and provide interested party testimony on Senate Bill 246, Supporting Alternatives for a Fair Education (SAFE) Act to revise student expulsion procedures.

As you may know, Groundwork is Ohio's statewide advocacy leader for early care and education. Groundwork is led by Executive Director, Shannon Jones, and governed by a robust steering committee of child-focused experts from around the state, including those who are leading the early care and education charge in their local communities, public school leaders, child advocates, and center and home child care providers.

Groundwork is testifying today as an interested party to Senate Bill 246 because we believe that a change in school culture is required to 1) better meet the needs of all of Ohio's children, particularly those who are experiencing trauma at an unprecedented rate; 2) position children for academic and life success and; 3) lay the foundation for our state's future economic prosperity by investing in Ohio's future workforce.

Our state is currently facing a workforce crisis. Our state's future depends on our kids and they are not ready for success. Only 40% of Ohio kindergartners enter the classroom ready to learn. Only 43% of Ohio's workforce has a degree or credential for available jobs when 65% of jobs in 2020 will require more than a high school diploma.

The skills gap we see in today's workforce begins early. It is no coincidence that only 40% of Ohio kindergartners enter the classroom ready to learn and only 43% of Ohio's workforce has a degree or credential for available jobs. Kindergarten ready means proficiency in literacy and math skills as well as possessing social and emotional skills including the ability to think critically, self-regulate and work with peers. We know that kindergarten readiness is a predictor of future academic success in K-12, postsecondary attainment and lifelong success and most Ohio kids arrive to the kindergarten classroom lacking in one or more of these essential skill domains.

Skills come from healthy development and education with the foundation for skill development being laid in the earliest years, with 90% of brain development occurring between birth and five years old. We have a critical period of time to position all Ohio children for success, but not all children have the same early experiences. Poor children's ability to develop on par with their peers is greatly compromised -- by age 3, low income learners have heard an average of 30 million fewer words than their high income peers and their vocabulary is half as large. While voluntary home visiting, high-quality child care and high-quality preschool are the evidence-based interventions proven to narrow this gap, too few Ohio kids have access to high-quality programs or any program at all.

While these gaps that persist do not discriminate between urban and rural students, we do know that some kids are far more likely to be left behind than others. For example, 46.2% of white kindergartners come to school ready to learn

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compared to only 23.5% of African American kindergarteners and 22.3% of Hispanic kindergartners. This racial inequity that exists is alarming and requires special consideration.

As we continue to follow Ohio's youngest students throughout their academic careers, we find that in the last school year there were over 34,000 suspensions and expulsions handed out to Ohio students, pre-k through third grade, the vast majority of these being for non-violent behaviors such as disruption. Young students who are expelled or suspended are as much as 10 times more likely to drop out of high school, experience academic failure and grade retention, hold negative attitudes toward school and face incarceration than those who are not. Considering that most children already do not enter school ready for kindergarten, this alarming impact on over 34,000 of Ohio's youngest children last year is devastating and perpetuating the gaps among student achievement and Ohio's workforce.

If we look at disaggregated data to further understand the use of suspension and expulsions, we are again reminded of the children who too often get left behind. Considering all suspensions and expulsions given among Ohio kindergartners, black kindergartners were 7 times more likely to be disciplined than white kindergartners. Among Ohio 1st grade suspensions and expulsions, black first graders were 8.6 times more likely to be disciplined than white first graders. Among Ohio 2nd grade suspensions and expulsions, black second graders were 10 times more likely to be disciplined as white second graders. This unconscionable gap widens with each passing year for our most at-risk 4-8 year olds.

There are many important and contributing factors to why some kids are more often left behind than others, however, understanding the impact of trauma in a child's life is critical. We can measure the trauma experienced by children by looking at the incidence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in their life. As you have heard from earlier testimony on this bill, ACEs are traumatic events that have the potential to cause enduring negative effects. During the earliest and most critical years of development, children are highly vulnerable to these adversities. As the frequency and length of ACEs increase, so do the impacts of physical and mental health, academic achievement, and self-sufficiency. You will note that the list of ACEs experienced by so many of our students does not include the damning impact of a suspension or expulsion, which can exacerbate the trauma that children are already experiencing in their day-to-day lives.

Children in Ohio are experiencing trauma at an alarming rate. 49% of Ohio kids have had a least one ACE. At the national level, about one in ten children (10%) had experienced three or more ACEs. Ohio ranks 46th in the nation for kids having three or more ACEs, putting them at higher risk for long-lasting negative effects. In five states—Arizona, Arkansas, Montana, New Mexico, *and Ohio*—one in seven children had experienced three or more ACEs, a significantly higher ratio than the national average. We also find that disparities we see in Ohio's early childhood discipline rates mirror the incidence of ACEs with black and Hispanic children at a much higher risk than their white peers for having ACEs.

Why are Ohio kids once again faring worse than those in most other states? We know Ohio kids are experiencing economic hardship at a higher rate than the national average. Among other reasons, in light of Ohio's opioid crisis, it isn't surprising that experts have found a meaningful link between ACEs and prescription drug abuse. Research shows that individuals who have experienced high levels of childhood trauma (five or more ACEs) are three times more likely to abuse prescription painkillers and 5 times more likely to inject drugs. Furthermore, the vast majority (80%) of opioid users seeking treatment had at least one ACE.

While policymakers are challenged to prevent the negative effects of ACEs and those who enter school unprepared to learn in the classroom, the diversity of experiences of children means that no single strategy alone will be adequate. We can, however, change the way we approach and respond to children who have experienced trauma. The SAFE Act is the change in school culture required to better meet the needs of all Ohio children by supporting schools in preparing teachers and other school professionals to be armed with the knowledge, skills and resources to better respond to the unique needs of Ohio kids most at-risk kids. By doing so, the SAFE Act is demanding better outcomes for all of our most at-risk young children by thoughtfully limiting the use of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions issued to Pre-K through 3rd grade students and measuring a school's progress over time to ensure accountability so that we can begin to eliminate racial disparities. The SAFE Act is critical to positioning children for academic and life success and helping to lay the foundation for our state's future economic prosperity by investing in our future workforce.