



**Ohio House of Representatives
Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services
House Bill 33
Suzanne Prescott**

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Chair Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to share with you today as part of this esteemed panel.

My name is Suzanne Prescott and I am the director of the Early Childhood Programs at Butler County Educational Service Center, serving children in Butler and Preble Counties as well as President of the Board, of the Ohio Head Start Association.

We serve as the home of the central intake and referral for a 7-county region assisting families to decide which program is the best fit. In Butler County this includes Help Me Grow home visitation and early intervention, Early Head Start, Head Start preschool, state Early Childhood Education grants, family child care licensure, and the grant to reduce the disparity in Black infant mortality rates. Many of these programs are also available in Preble County. These programs are critical in our counties where currently less than a third of children entering kindergarten are demonstrating readiness and about one in six children are living in poverty. **I'm encouraged by the Governor's proposal of a new Department of Children and Youth that will add to the effectiveness of implementing these proven programs.**

Our programs are designed to foster children's growth and help children, prenatal to five reach their greatest potential, ensuring that they are ready to enter kindergarten and succeed in life. Our programs do not just focus on the child, but also on the families who are raising them. Our Head Start Program also offers the **Therapeutic Interagency Preschool (TIP) Program** for children involved with Butler County Children Services. TIP provides trauma-focused, year-round Head Start preschool and mental health counseling services to all preschool children who are referred from our Child Welfare system within Butler County. This is one of the oldest running programs like this in the nation. Our youngest children are experiencing trauma and there is a need for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, and more Therapeutic classrooms like ours to that contribute to positive outcomes for children facing mental health challenges and promoting better mental health into adulthood.

The State of Head Start and Early Head Start in Ohio

While we offer state services, our Head Start and Early Head Start programs are federally funded. Many people are not aware of the critical role Head Start and Early Head Start plays for Ohio children prenatal to five, and their families. Both Head Start and Early Head Start provide proven models of comprehensive support for children and their families experiencing poverty and are foundational to Ohio's early care and education ecosystem and a critical part of our work. Sadly, Early Head Start, the prenatal to age three program, is only serving 8% of children under three years of age living in poverty in Ohio and Head Start, the preschool program, is only serving 29% of Ohio's three and four year olds living in poverty. Ohio receives over \$280 million a year for Head Start and \$96 million a year for Early Head Start from the federal government and provides **no state supplemental funding**. Comprehensive services for infant/toddlers and their families make a difference and they need more investment.

More Resources are Needed for Infants and Toddlers

If we don't provide essential services in the first three years of life, there are huge consequences. Often people think that babies will weather poverty, domestic violence, neglect and trauma because they cannot talk. However, this is not true. Meghan Schmelzer from the nonprofit *Zero to Three* puts it best, "Babies remember, they just remember it differently. We remember in our brains, and they remember in their bodies." When I was a young caseworker, I had a young mother with three children under the age of four and I witnessed a baby laying on the floor while another was learning how to walk. The new walker fell on the baby, landing on his head. That baby did not cry or react, because he had experienced so much neglect and trauma his body was shutting down. He was diagnosed with *failure to thrive* and was removed from this mother's care. We know now that with the support of home visiting or center-based care, this mother would have been able to learn how to care for her infant as well as how to heal from her own trauma. That outcome is better for all of us.

Early Head Start deploys several delivery models to meet the needs of families, including center-based programming, family child care programs and evidence-based home visiting. Meeting families where they are prenatal to age three provides crucial support to pregnant moms and new parents as they deal with the challenges of raising babies and young children. These programs are an imperative and proven investment.

One of the leading causes for infant mortality in Butler County is premature births. Early Head Start home visiting was involved with a mother who had three pregnancies, all babies were born prematurely. She joined home visiting with her fourth pregnancy and through a relationship with her home visitor and education, she was able to reduce her baby's exposure to nicotine and, for the first time, have a baby that was born full term. This baby did not require an extended stay in the hospital or early intervention services. A great investment for all of us.

We must have a new investment in infant & toddler child care. In Butler and Preble Counties, only 35% and 14%, respectively, of eligible infants and toddlers receive services in the first three years of life. In December 2022, we contacted all of the highly rated child care centers serving infants and toddlers. At that time there were only 13 openings in Butler County and

zero openings in Preble County for families looking for care using Publicly Funded Child Care. The cost at these centers ranges from \$1080 to \$1800 a month for private pay, an unreachable level for most families. According to the US Department of Labor, families in Butler and Preble Counties are spending 16% and 14%, respectively, of their median income on child care. We know that access to high-quality and affordable early learning and development experiences works. The National Forum on Early Childhood Policy and Programs has found that high quality early childhood programs can yield a \$4 – \$9 dollar return per \$1 invested. This means substantial savings in the future for Ohio.

As you deliberate on this bill, I ask that you support the following priorities that will increase access to early care and education:

- (1) A new investment in infant & toddler child care
- (2) Increasing proposed funding for preschool
- (3) Increasing publicly funded child care eligibility to 160% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL)
- (4) The creation of the Department of Children and Youth

Budgets are about setting priorities and making choices. I see no greater priority than our children. I hope you agree. Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you have today or by email at prescotts@bcesc.org.