



preschool PROMISE

Dayton & Montgomery County, Ohio

Ohio House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Health and Human Services
House Bill 33
March 14, 2023

Chair Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services, my name is Robyn Lightcap. I serve as the Board Chair of Groundwork Ohio and as the Executive Director of Preschool Promise in Dayton.

I fully support the Governor's proposed commitments to young children and families. I am excited about his call to make Ohio the best place to be a young child. By focusing on this goal, we're giving young children what they deserve. We are also securing Ohio's economic future. Everything we do for young children is an investment in their becoming the well-educated, productive, self-supporting adults we need to be economically competitive as a state. **I ask you to maintain the Governor's proposed investments and invest slightly more in child care and preschool. Specifically, I am asking you to:**

- 1. Invest \$30 million from the General Revenue Fund to expand access to infant and toddler child care.**
- 2. Invest an additional \$46 million in the Ohio Department of Education's Early Childhood Education preschool program to serve more children.**

Montgomery County is investing local funding; we can't do it alone.

Preschool Promise is a nonprofit that supports more than 3,500 3- and 4-year-olds, helping families find and afford high quality preschool. Our goal is that every child in Montgomery County will be ready for kindergarten. We know that children who attend our high-quality preschool sites are much more likely to be ready for kindergarten. 36% of the children who attended Preschool Promise sites test demonstrating readiness on Ohio's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment, compared to only 18% who did not attend Preschool Promise sites.

Preschool Promise offers families sliding-scale tuition at over 100 partner preschool sites. We provide in-depth professional development, scholarships for earning degrees and credentials, and wage supplements to hundreds of early childhood educators every year. We recently expanded our work to support families with young children from Birth to 3 because we know

that waiting until preschool or kindergarten to promote children's physical, emotional and educational development is too late. We need to support children during the period when their brains are growing faster than at any time in their lives. When children start off more prepared, they are much more likely to succeed in third grade reading and the rest of their school and career journeys.

Our business and government leaders in Montgomery County have invested local private and public dollars in this early childhood work because they recognize that learning begins at birth. While we are incredibly fortunate to have local investment, it is nowhere close to enough to serve all young children and their families. This is why we need the state's increased investment.

We must invest in child care and preschool now.

Child care has two important contributions to our society. The first is to allow parents to work and the second is to provide the learning environment our youngest children need to be successful in kindergarten and beyond.

Child care teachers and leaders have an incredibly important job. They also have an incredibly difficult job. The hours are long – at least 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., and sometimes longer, to accommodate the needs of working parents. There is no flexibility in hours. There is no option of working remotely. There is no checking your phone during the workday. Child care teachers have not just one child, but a room full of children to care for all at one time.

Last week I went to visit one of our child care programs in Dayton. I walked into the infant classroom and the teacher had three infants in high chairs and one who was seated at a small table. This teacher was masterfully handling all four of the infants on her own. She was feeding them, talking to them, helping them explore and learn.

There is not any more space at this program for additional infants. The Director must find another teacher to work in the classroom in order to enroll more infants. Finding a child care teacher is a very difficult task. This particular teacher makes an abysmally low \$15/hour for the important work she does each day. It is no wonder we are having a hard time attracting and retaining people in the field. Last year we had an astounding one-third of our teachers leave their roles as teachers at our partner Preschool Promise sites in Dayton. This turnover is three times higher than it was before Covid. We must value our child care teachers if we want them to stay in the field, and one critical way to value them is to pay them a respectable wage. More state investment is a necessity if we want child care to be available for working parents.

We must change the eligibility for child care so more parents can work.

I support the Governor's proposal to **increase the eligibility for families to get help paying for child care – from 142% of the Federal Poverty Level to 160% of the Federal Poverty Level.** This is essential. Right now working parents have a nearly impossible task of paying for child care. A single parent with one child does not get any help paying for child care if they make \$13.50 or more an hour. Ohio's eligibility is one of the lowest in the country. The eligibility level does not line up with any other public service programs. It is surprising to see discussions about providing school vouchers for families up to 400% of the FPL, while we are stuck at an astoundingly low 142% of the FPL for child care. We simply must increase the eligibility for parents who want to work and are paid too little to afford child care.

The Governor also proposed **creating scholarships to help parents in “critical occupations” receive help paying for child care – up to 200% of the FPL.** I believe we should be offering child care assistance for *all families* up to 200% of the FPL, and I am glad to see this is moving in the right direction.

We must make more preschool slots available for children.

The Governor also proposed an increase of \$46 million in the Ohio Department of Education's early childhood education preschool funding to serve more preschoolers in low-income households. This is moving in the right direction; however, we must do more. **My request is that you increase the Ohio Department of Education Early Childhood Education funding by an additional \$46 million so we can educate more children.**

We must address the dire shortage of infant and toddler child care.

Last fall we did a survey in Montgomery County and found that across all of our child care and preschool programs we have 200+ vacancies for staff that equate to 2,000 children on wait lists. These numbers underscore that now is the time for the state to invest in child care and preschool. Parents cannot work unless we invest more to make child care accessible. There is a particularly dire shortage of infant and toddler child care availability in our community and across the state. Working parents far too often cannot find a child care option when they have a baby, and they are forced to stay home and quit working. I ask that you address this shortage in infant and toddler child care capacity by **allocating \$30 million of General Revenue Funds over the biennium to expand the capacity of infant and toddler child care through infrastructure grants.**

We need to expand access to Home Visiting.

I also support the Governor's investment to expand access to Home Visiting. We know this is an evidence-based strategy to support pregnant and new moms. In our community we are only reaching 20% of low-income families with this proven intervention. We are missing out on the opportunity to give children and their parents the strongest possible start.

We need to streamline and create a new Department of Children and Youth.

Finally, **I strongly support the creation of the new Department of Children and Youth.** Ohio has effective evidence-based policies and programs in place. But too often they operate independently of one another, without common-sense coordination and integration. Our children and families — and taxpayers — need us to work in concert and without duplicating services. Housing programs under one child-focused entity promotes the kind of thoughtful, cost-effective services we all support.

If you are a child care or preschool provider in Ohio, you must manage distinct state and federal programs across many different departments. For example, I know of child care programs in our community that accept children on the Publicly Funded Child Care program, run by the Ohio Department of Job & Family Services. This program has specific work requirements with eligibility of 142% and below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). The child care programs also participate in the preschool program run by the Ohio Department of Education that funds children 200% and below the Federal Poverty Level. And they participate in the Head Start program run by the United States Department of Health & Human Services that requires 100% and below the FPL. Each of these programs requires different paperwork, different hours of service, different eligibility levels, different programming. Yet all the programs have the same goal of providing high quality care and education for young children. We need to bring all of these diverse programs together so we can maximize every dollar invested. We need to make it more efficient for families to access services and for educators to run the programs.

Thank you for allowing me to share my testimony. I'm hopeful you will show your commitment to families and children by building on the Governor's proposal and investing more in child care and preschool in the House version of the budget.