

HOUSE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION SUBCOMMITTEE

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Warren County Community Services Early Learning Centers

March 16, 2009

Good morning Chairman Dyer, ranking member Morgan and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Subcommittee of the Finance and Appropriations Committee. My name is Lisa Cayard and I am the Director of the Warren County Community Services Early Learning Centers in Lebanon. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Our program provides Head Start and Early Learning Initiative services to about 300 preschool children from low income families in Warren County. Our goal is to make sure preschoolers are ready for kindergarten, by providing high quality early education as well as health, nutrition, disability services, and support for parents.

I have been working in the field of early education for over 30 years, first as a Head Start teacher, and as a Head Start Director since 1990. I have felt all my life that I have a calling to make a difference in the lives of children, and I am strongly committed to the vital importance of this work.

In these challenging economic times, it is more important than ever to make sure that Ohio's children are well educated, and that children begin school with a strong early foundation for learning. Early Care and Education is critical to working parents who need child care, as well as for preparing our children to be the workforce of tomorrow.

Ohio's strong history of investments in Early Care and Education is based on many years of research showing that experiences in early childhood impact a child's entire life. These years are critical. When children do not have experiences with language, books, learning activities, and social skills in these early years, those neural pathways in the brain can be lost forever. When children enter the public school system without the basic skills for success, it is difficult and costly to provide later remedial education.

The positive impact of early education can only be realized through high quality programs. Ohio has several initiatives that promote quality in early care and education settings. It is critical that these components be protected in the current budget so that we do not compromise our children's futures.

Step Up to Quality is the state's quality rating system for early childhood centers. It gives incentives and recognition to early care and education programs that meet quality benchmarks over and above minimum health and safety child care licensing standards. In 2008 nearly 45,000 children were served in 455 star rated centers. Currently, there are 613 star-rated centers. I am proud to report that two centers operated by Warren County Community Services were awarded star ratings last month. Our Franklin site received two stars, and our Lebanon site received three stars, the highest rating the state awards. **Ohio needs Step Up to Quality so we can continue to raise the bar for all early learning centers.** The educational qualifications of pre-kindergarten

teachers are one of the most important indicators of program quality. Ohio's Teacher Education and Compensation Helps program (TEACH) provides scholarships to support teachers in early childhood programs in earning a certificate or degree in early childhood education. **The TEACH scholarships are a critical support to ensure quality in early education.**

Ohio provides funding for several pre-kindergarten programs, including Early Childhood Education in the public schools, the Early Learning Initiative (ELI), and subsidized child care. All three of these programs are only available to children in families with incomes below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty level. Together with federally-funded Head Start, **only 30 percent of Ohio's low-income children have access to publicly funded early care and education in Ohio.**

I cannot overstate the importance of the Early Learning Initiative (ELI) program in the lives of children and families. ELI provides the full range of comprehensive health and child development services, similar to Head Start, as well as full day, full year child care. The children who come to us are in desperate need of these services, and so many parents need this kind of support.

Let me give you an example of such a family. We recently enrolled a brother and sister named Cage and Katlyne, after months of trying to track down the family because they kept moving from place to place. The mother was living in the abuse shelter after leaving an abusive relationship. She was trying to find employment, but needed child care for her children. One child has some significant disabilities, but he was not receiving speech therapy because of their frequent moves. Now that they are attending our ELI program, he is receiving speech therapy. The children didn't have clothes that fit, so we provided clothing through Neediest Kids of All. The children needed dental treatment, so we arranged an appointment with a local dentist who donated free dental care. We also have an early childhood mental health therapist on site who can help the children overcome the trauma of living with domestic violence. This wide spectrum of needs cannot be met in an ordinary child care center, because they don't have the special staff training, the community partnerships, or the resources made possible by ELI funding. Without these comprehensive services, Cage and Katlyne could not hope to enter kindergarten ready to learn. These children love coming to school, and they are learning by leaps and bounds. The other day, Cage drew me a picture of a dog, and printed "d-o-g." He will be ready for kindergarten.

Currently, ELI programs are reimbursed at the full time rate when a child attends 25 hours per week. Many children's attendance is irregular because of family problems and illness, so we are not able to claim full reimbursement for about a quarter of our enrolled children. If the number of hours required for full time reimbursement is raised to 35 hours per week, ELI programs will be forced to reduce program quality in terms of staffing, learning materials, and services. **I strongly urge you not to increase the number of hours required for full time reimbursement.** This change would make it impossible for ELI providers to provide the level of services that make this early learning program so successful.

Ohio's children are depending on you. Early care and education is one of the best investments Ohio can make for our economy and for our future.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have at this time.