

HOUSE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION SUBCOMMITTEE

Kathy T. Dixon
Council on Rural Services
March 16, 2009

Good afternoon, Chairman Dyer, ranking member Morgan and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Subcommittee of the Finance and Appropriations Committee. My name is Kathy Dixon and I am Director of Early Childhood Programs at Council on Rural Services in Piqua. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Council on Rural Services is a Private-Non-Profit Organization that provides services for families throughout the life-span. We provide Early Childhood Services to over 2500 children in 10 counties in Southwestern Ohio, including Auglaize, Champaign, Darke, Greene, Logan, Miami, Preble, Shelby, and Van Wert. We currently provide quality Early Childhood Services to over 650 children in State Funded Early Learning Initiative (ELI) classrooms, 1105 children in Federally Funded Head Start, 132 Infants and Toddlers in Early Head Start, as well as children in Child Care, including children whose families are receiving Ohio Department of Job and Family Services Subsidies. Of our 30 eligible locations, 20 have received the *Star Rating* from Ohio's *Step Up to Quality*. The other 10 locations are new or in process of the SUTQ process. Through these quality programs, children receive the benefit of an Evidenced Based Curriculum, Credentialed Teachers, and the other research-based indicators that promote Quality Outcomes for children.

In this challenging budget environment, it is very important to continue building the system of Quality Early Care and Education in Ohio. Ohio's early childhood education programs serve tens of thousands of Ohio's children, support parents' participation in our economy and prepare our children to enter school ready to learn. In a time of economic hardship, these programs are part of the backbone of supporting our current workforce while preparing our children for the workforce of tomorrow. It is critical that Early Childhood funding that promotes quality, based upon current evidence and research, continues to be available to allow ALL children in Ohio to have the advantage of Quality Early Care and Education programs.

I value the opportunities that I've had to work with young children for over 30 years since graduating from Ohio State in Family and Child Development, beginning my career in the late 70s in an MRDD program teaching preschoolers with disabilities, and then again in the early 90s when school districts became responsible for providing a preschool education for children who have disabilities. For the past 12 years, I've supervised and directed programs for children on IEPs for the public school districts in Miami and Darke Counties, and joined Council on Rural Services last June. Along the way, I taught Preschool at Overfield Early Childhood Center in Troy, earned my Master's in Early Childhood Education, and took Post-Graduate Coursework for Supervisor and Elementary Principal Certificates."

As I worked with school Principals in "transitioning" children from Preshool to Kindergarten, it quickly became apparent that the Kindergarten of today is NOT the Kindergarten that you and I attended. Skills that you and I learned in first grade are now a part of Kindergarten. Children are expected to enter Kindergarten with the skills that you and I actually

learned in Kindergarten. It has become the expectation rather than the exception that children have a Preschool experience prior to entry into Kindergarten. Children who have not had a quality Preschool experience begin their school career at a clear disadvantage, already “behind” many of their peers before they have even started their school career!

Many of counties that we serve are in rural areas where Preschool opportunities are limited. This is especially true for children of families who may be referred to as the “working poor”. These families are above 100% of the poverty level, and are therefore, not eligible for Head Start. If their children don’t have a delay or disability, they are not eligible for Preschool Special Education. These families often struggle to meet the minimum survival requirements of food and rent. The cost of quality Private Preschool services is well beyond their very tight budgets.

Over the past few years, ELI programs, and JFS Child Care subsidies have allowed these parents to access Quality Early Childhood Services so that their children are ready to start Kindergarten on an equal playing field with other children.

Council on Rural Services provides ELI preschool classes in 11 school districts through public school partnerships, as well as in classrooms in our centers. Superintendents from these districts are extremely supportive of the Quality Preschool programs that are provided in their districts through ELI funding. Letters received from Superintendents note: “the program is absolutely essential for all of the children in the program, but especially those children from low socioeconomic home environments” and “the results have been outstanding...I still am not satisfied with our KRA-L scores overall, but that is only because we still need more preschool-aged children attending Early Learning Centers...Preparing our youngest students to be school ready is not a luxury, but a necessity in the Twenty-first Century.” I will provide you with a packet with these letters, as well as letters from families and teachers who vehemently support the availability for continued Early Childhood services for ALL children.

Reduction in ELI “spaces” throughout our region, and throughout the state, will have a lifelong effect on children whose parents cannot afford private Preschool, but are not eligible for Head Start or Preschool Special Education. If the ELI requirement of hours to be considered “full time” is increased from 25 to 35, choices and needs of families will be limited and agencies will be forced to decrease employment of teachers based on the resulting decreased program revenue. If additional “co-pay” requirements are added to families at 101% of the Poverty Level, families will be forced to choose between a Quality Preschool Education for their children or purchase of Food or payment of Rent. This is not a choice families should have to make.

According to the Ohio Department of Education, nearly one-third of the 130,000 children entering kindergarten each year are not prepared to succeed. In 2006, nearly 8,000 children in kindergarten through third grade were held back a grade, costing Ohio \$43 million in basic aid funds alone.

A sobering statistic finds that in at least four states, proficiency scores on the third-grade test our use to predict how many prison beds will be needed years later. (National Center on Education, Disability and Juvenile Justice)

The Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland found that for every \$1 invested in high-quality preschool programs in Ohio, \$1.62 would be returned to the public.ⁱⁱ Other studies indicate from \$7 to \$14 return for each dollar invested in Quality Early Childhood Programs. There is no doubt that Quality Early Childhood Education is a wise investment.

Research on early care and education and brain development shows:

- A child's environment during the first five years of life can greatly impact the brain's ability to develop.
- 85% of a child's brain is developed by the age of five.
- Young children exposed to high-quality instructional settings exhibit better language and mathematics skills, better social skills and better relationships with classmates than do children in lower-quality care.ⁱⁱⁱ

As John Dewey, Father of Modern Education said: "what the wisest and best parent wants for his own children, so must the community want for all its children." We DO want the best education for ALL children in our state.

These ARE difficult economic times for our state, and difficult economic choices must be made. The challenge of balancing our state's budget at this time is appreciated. As difficult decisions are made, please remember these young and innocent children whose futures are in front of them. Quality Early Education and Care programs serve as a "safely net" as the children spend their day in a safe, warm and nurturing environment, receive nutritious and well-balanced meals AND are provided with School Readiness Skills with evidence based curricula and credentialed teachers that will allow them to achieve success in school, and ultimately in life.

This is a true bi-partisan issue, with legislators on both sides of the aisle realizing that early care and education is one of the best investments Ohio can make.

Please invest in these children who will be our future productive citizens of Ohio.

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

ⁱ Ohio Department of Education power user reports on student retention by grade level. http://ilrc.ode.state.oh.us/Power_Users.asp Accessed June 15, 2006.

ⁱⁱ Belfield, Clive R. *Should Ohio Invest in Universal Pre-schooling?* Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. February, 2005.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Building Blocks for Success: State Efforts in Early Childhood Education." *Education Week*. 2002.