

Melissa Kircher

New Miami Local School District

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Good morning Chairman Cary, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the Senate Finance and Financial Institutions Committee. My name is Melissa Kircher and I am Superintendent of the New Miami Local School District in Hamilton, Ohio. I am also a member of Groundwork. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

The New Miami School District is a small district that serves approximately 864 students in Butler County. The poverty level of students ranks as one of the highest in southern Ohio. New Miami has a free and reduced lunch count of over 79 percent. The average income of parents in the district is approximately 23,000 dollars, while also noting that only 43 percent of our parents have graduated from high school. While these are significant factors to overcome, New Miami has received national attention for their academic performance in the last five years.

Preschool has always been a dream of our community and a desire of our Board of Education. Last year New Miami was granted an entitlement grant from the Ohio Department of Education. For the first time in the history of the district preschool would become a part of the culture at New Miami. Our parents do not have the means for payment of preschool so the grant allowed students to attend who were economically disadvantaged. In a matter of days the preschool was and continues to be filled with two classes of 20 students each. This is incredible when looking at the average grade size at New Miami, which is approximately 62 students. Recent data of the first class of 4 years olds that now attend kindergarten this year shows improvement in all academic areas, especially early literacy skills. The district can not afford to fund a preschool with our local funds. However, the foresight and imitative that the state has taken to recognize that early childhood education is vital for future success in school is refreshing and encouraging. We are asking you to continue this commitment and not roll back the progress we have made.

New Miami has also had all day kindergarten for approximately fifteen years. All day kindergarten was a must for our students who were coming to school with no readiness skills. Positive outcomes for all-day programs are generally attributed to the additional hours spent in kindergarten, which provide for greater continuity of day-to-day activities and a developmentally appropriate curriculum that includes activity centers, projects, field trips, and free play. The additional time also allows teachers to observe the children and become more familiar with their developmental needs. Teachers can later use this information to develop an individualized instructional plan. In an all-day kindergarten children spend more time engaged in child-initiated, independent, flexible, in-depth, and creative activities that lead them to gain more confidence in their abilities and build better relationships with classmates and teachers. Moreover, all-day kindergarten schedules tend to be more relaxed, have more repetition of the same content, offer more remedial instruction, and put greater emphasis on literacy and numeracy than their half-day counterparts do. All-day kindergarten children are better prepared for first grade and are less likely to be held back in a grade. Educational policy makers have also argued in favour of

all-day kindergarten for low-income minority children. The academic achievement of children who are at risk is higher for those in all-day kindergarten than for those in half-day kindergarten.

We are in the midst of recreating Ohio's education system. But the challenge is great. When a child enters the system not properly prepared, it is difficult to catch up and become a successful student.

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.

Four of seven states surrounding Ohio offer voluntary early education opportunities for children without any income limits. *Illinois, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Wisconsin's 4K* program do not have any income restrictions for their state pre-kindergarten programs.

If Ohio is going to truly build a competitive 21st century education system, we must include early care and education for our youngest children.

Groundwork requests that you restore the \$244 million in cuts to the early childhood system in House Bill 1 to support our youngest children and our working families, including the \$119 million for Public Preschool and the Early Learning Initiative, impacting 8,800 children per year.

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