

Ohio House
Finance Health and Human Services Subcommittee Committee
House Bill 166
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Thank you, Chairman Romanchuk, Ranking Member West and members of the committee. My name is Kimberly Tice and I am the Executive Director of the Ohio Association for the Education of Young Children (Ohio AEYC), the state affiliate of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and I serve on the steering committee of Groundwork Ohio, our statewide leader in early education policy research and advocacy. Ohio AEYC currently represents nearly 2,500 early educators across the state who work every day to ensure the highest quality care and education for Ohio's young children. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and provide interested party testimony on House Bill 166, the Fiscal Year 2020-2021 Operating Budget on behalf of our organization and those dedicated early educators who are laying the groundwork for strong development in tens of thousands of kids across the state as we speak.

To begin, I want to express our excitement and gratitude for the administration's commitment to utilize federal CCDBG funding to increase provider payments. For too long, provider reimbursement rates have been woefully low and this is a smart use of federal dollars to move toward creating a sustainable child care system in Ohio. But I want to make clear that this is just that—a first step. These increased federal funds are not sufficient to fill long-standing gaps after years of stagnant funding. As a result of a system that has been starved for so long, high-quality providers are often reluctant to serve families receiving publicly funded child care subsidies or are forced to limit the number of children they serve in publicly funded slots. Child care providers across the state lack the resources they need to sustain their business, much less provide high-quality care to our most vulnerable children.

High quality early childhood education is critical to positive child development and has the potential to generate economic returns. But child care providers can't deliver on these promises without additional state investments. All parents want the very best for their kids – and that means child care you can trust, no matter your income level. But currently, parents bear most of the brunt of the cost of care. And this issue impacts more than just families with young children—the inability to find quality affordable child care is one of the greatest factors limiting women in the workplace, further exacerbating Ohio's current workforce crisis.

All children, in all settings deserve well-prepared and well-compensated teachers. And we know that the interactions young children have with their early educators are critical to achieving the positive outcomes that are most valuable for our kids and our state: improved kindergarten readiness and rates of high school graduation, reduced rates of crime, increased earnings and decreased reliance on public assistance—the list goes on and on. Yet early childhood educators in Ohio earn an average of only \$10 per hour and nearly half of these workers rely on public assistance themselves to meet their own families' needs.

In preparation for this testimony, I spoke with a number of highly-rated child care providers who are hopeful that the increased reimbursement rates will help them move toward a financially sustainable business model. Two themes emerged from these conversations. First, program directors are piecing together a patchwork of funding sources to keep their doors open. I commend them for their innovative efforts yet, each described an overwhelming amount of paperwork and time to manage the differing monitoring, reporting and staffing requirements of each different funding source leaving them little time to focus on continuous improvement efforts.

The second theme is the early childhood workforce staffing crisis. Each director I spoke with identified recruiting and retaining qualified staff as the number one barrier to maintaining and increasing quality. One four-star program that serves primarily publicly funded children has been required to increase ratios and put a hold on enrolling more children as a result of not being able to maintain staff. One director shared that she has six children receiving services for issues related to trauma and opioid abuse in the home. These children are most in need of highly qualified consistent teachers, yet the staff turnover causes additional disruption to their lives. She shared that her most qualified teacher who had a Master's degree left her program to work in a call center where she could earn almost \$20 per hour and receive benefits that most child care programs are unable to offer. And remember – the programs I spoke with are 3-5 five star rated which leads me to conclude that these challenges are multiplied for majority of programs in Ohio who are either unrated or are in the 1-2 star category.

As you can tell, current investments in our system are inadequate to support the recruitment and retention of a highly qualified workforce, which is necessary to ensure we can deliver on the promise of early childhood education and meet our state-mandated deadlines for achieving quality by 2025. A recent report on “Transforming the Financing of Early Care & Education” from the National Academy of Sciences acknowledges that the current system is “neither sustainable

nor adequate to provide the quality of care and learning that children and families need.” The total cost of providing access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education for all children exceeds current funding amounts. Our system needs increased state dollars to ensure predictability and sustainability within the system so we can better serve our most at-risk kids, especially children of color, those living in rural communities, and communities experiencing child care deserts.