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**Written Testimony for the Ohio Senate Health Committee  
Amended Substitute House Bill 96**

**Patricia Gleason, COO, Learning Grove  
May 14, 2025**

Chairperson Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Committee, my name is Patricia Gleason and I am the Chief Operating Officer of Learning Grove. I write today to urge you to restore critical investments in early childhood programs in Ohio's FY2026-27 state budget, Amended Substitute House Bill 96.

Learning Grove is a key provider of child care and early learning programs in Southwest Ohio and Northern Kentucky. We serve a racially and socioeconomically diverse population of nearly 7,000 children, youth, and families annually with programs across our region. We are the single largest provider of publicly subsidized child care in Hamilton County.

We believe all children deserve to be nurtured through high-quality education, to think critically, get along with others, and set the path toward a productive future. To help realize these experiences, we never compromise on practices and programs that are best for children. All our programs achieve the highest quality rating in both states. We know it is critical to have qualified teachers, effective ratios of adults to children and appropriate group sizes for children to learn. We also know some children need access to physical and mental health services and other interventions and that those services are most effective with young children.

Groundwork Ohio has outlined key priorities that will strengthen our state's early childhood system, and we ask that you support all of them. We specifically urge the Senate to:

**1. Reinstate the full \$300 million in TANF funds to Child Care.**

Ohio spends about \$400 million TANF dollars each year on child care. Reducing funds would cut the overall child care budget, weakening one of our most effective anti-poverty and workforce tools. Nearly half of Ohio parents with children under five say child care is hard to find, and 73% call it "expensive." 44% of working parents missed work or left early in the past two years because of child care breakdowns and 49% cut back hours impacting over one million Ohio workers.

**2. Restore the Governor's proposal to raise Publicly Funded Child Care (PFCC) initial eligibility to 160 % FPL (continuing eligibility at 300 % FPL).**

Increasing eligibility would open the door to child care for 11,000 additional children in families of three earning up to \$42,640.9. It would also bring Ohio out of last place among the states for initial eligibility.

**3. Restore the The Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA), Ohio's only statewide measure of early learning impact.**

The KRA is Ohio's only statewide, child level tool that measures how prepared every kindergartner is across four domains: social emotional development, language and literacy, mathematics, and physical well being. Nearly four in five low-income children are not demonstrating kindergarten readiness, and 44% of all kindergartners are off track in literacy. Children who start behind are far less likely to meet third grade reading and math benchmarks, graduate, or earn postsecondary credentials. Policymakers and taxpayers can see whether public dollars for child care, preschool, and home visiting programs are improving outcomes statewide and in local communities. The KRA is a critical early indicator of student progress, helping us identify learning gaps and invest in the supports that children need most.

**4. Restore the Governor's recommended funding levels for the Child Care Choice Voucher Program.**

The Child Care Choice Voucher program serves families earning up to 200 % FPL who are working or in training but do not qualify for PFCC. It supports over 8,000 children and is projected to reach 29,000 children over the biennium. The estimated cost of \$75 million in FY 2026 and \$150 million in FY 2027 is a modest investment compared with the \$5.48 billion annual hit Ohio's economy takes when working parents can't access care for their children.

**Ohio's child care providers are in crisis.** The workforce behind the workforce is struggling. Between 2023 and 2024, nearly 1 in 5 early childhood educators left the field and more than half (58%) of Ohio child care programs report staffing shortages that limit available slots for families. Learning Grove has closed six of the twenty centers we operate. Without additional state funding for child care, programs across the state face the same challenges we do. Ohioans cannot go back to work without access to child care. The child care workforce is essential to allowing all other workers to do their jobs. Child care needs support in this budget.

Parents want to work. Early childhood professionals need support. Businesses need reliable employees. Children deserve a strong start. At Learning Grove we see every day the toll that an underfunded child care system takes on working parents struggling to make ends meet, on businesses who can't recruit and retain employees who don't have child care, and on child care workers whose salaries are so low that they qualify for a child care subsidy for their own children. Please help us by fully funding the Governor's child care priorities in the budget.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. Please reach out to me directly if you have questions about our testimony or Ohio's child care system.

Sincerely,



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