

Our Policy Agenda

Groundwork Ohio

Early Learning

This agenda was prepared by Groundwork Ohio with the thoughtful input of stakeholders across the state including the Groundwork Early Learning Advisory Council.

Ohio's early care and education system is multifaceted, and impacts children, families, educators, employers and the broader economy. To create an early learning policy agenda that effectively addresses these diverse needs, we must focus on access, quality, affordability, and equity. This agenda outlines key strategies and actions necessary to sustainably transform Ohio's early care and education system, ensuring that every child gets the support they need to thrive. This agenda takes a comprehensive approach, addressing both immediate needs and long-term goals.

While we seek to advance a diverse array of innovative solutions, we are disciplined in our advocacy for increased public investment. Stakeholders are unified in recognizing that our current system's deficiencies cannot be rectified without substantial, new, and sustainable investment. Funding is essential not only for expanding access to quality early care and education programs that drive positive outcomes for young children but also for building the capacity of programs and early childhood educators to support this expanded access. Progress on both fronts simultaneously is crucial to developing a robust early care and education system.

Finally, our policy agenda must place equity at its core. We recognize that disparities in early childhood education disproportionately affect marginalized communities, and it is imperative that our efforts focus on leveling the playing field for all children and families. By centering equity in policy development, we can ensure that every child, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to succeed and thrive.

The red text areas in this policy agenda represent Groundwork Ohio's key budget priorities for the FY26-7 State Budget, which focus on increasing access to care for parents, ensuring high-quality early childhood experiences for children, and securing the financial stability of the early childhood education system to support educators and programs. These priorities are essential to creating a system that meets the diverse needs of Ohio's children and families while fostering a strong foundation for early learning and development.

We are committed to working with policymakers, families, educators and communities to accomplish the following:

1. Increase access to affordable, quality child care.

- **Increase eligibility for Publicly Funded Child Care (PFCC) to at least 200% of the Federal Poverty Level to serve more working families with low incomes.**
- Sustain and build child care capacity through eligibility policy, grants, contracts, and vouchers to address gaps in access to child care.
 - Including building capacity to serve infants and toddlers and provide care to children with special needs and children engaged in the child welfare system.
 - Including sustaining the intent of the Child Care Choice Voucher program.
- **Increase access to public preschool to serve more children in quality programs and transition more part-time grants to full time grants to meet the needs of working families.**
- Simplify and integrate programs through common application process and increase investment and strategic use of diverse funding from local, state, and federal sources to make it as easy as possible for families to access services.
- Increase parental choice in Ohio's private, mixed delivery system that meets the needs and preferences of families by increasing access to child care in a variety of settings (center-based, family or home-based, public schools, faith-based etc.)
- ***Make copayments more affordable for families across a sliding scale fee and waive copayments for vulnerable populations (benchmark goal is to limit copayments to 7% of household income). And ensure that with this change, the burden is not unfairly shifted to providers.**
- Provide resources and support necessary for counties to implement any child care policy and eligibility changes.

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- Invest in and learn from public-private partnerships and tax policies that support the private sector contributing to child care solutions to expand access to child care for working families as a workforce and economic development strategy.
- Enhance the experience and engagement of families so that caregivers have the support they need to successfully navigate Ohio's early childhood systems (ex. family navigators).

2. Support quality early learning experiences that prepare children for Kindergarten.

- **Implement new Step Up to Quality standards to fidelity, prioritize data-driven continuous improvement, maintain commitment to licensing and quality standards that uphold best practices to support children's healthy development (lower adult-child ratios, parent engagement, curriculum and assessments, safe facilities) and are accountable to child outcomes.**
- Increase access to Early Intervention, Special Education, and Early Childhood Mental Health Services to give every child the support they need to grow, thrive, and participate in the early care and education system.
- Support and integrate evidence-based quality programming, including Head Start, Early Head Start, and SPARK to increase positive outcomes for children in vulnerable populations.
- Prepare every child for kindergarten, specifically Black children and children of color who are disproportionately not demonstrating readiness, to promote academic success throughout their educational trajectory and continue to assess kindergarten readiness through data driven assessment.
- Integrate culturally responsive practices to increase equitable experiences for Black children and children of color, refugees, and English Language Learners.

3. Support effective early childhood educators to meet the growing needs of young children.

- **Improve payment practices that better support a program's ability to deliver quality learning including making substantial progress towards paying the actual cost of quality child care. We recommend moving first towards more sustainable payment practices including:**
 - **Target the 75th percentile of the 2024 Market Rate Survey (MRS) for base rates as the next benchmark while maintaining tiered rates for providing higher levels of quality; and**
 - * Paying providers based on enrollment of children versus attendance.**
- Implement and scale strategies to recruit and retain qualified early childhood educators, including paid internships and educational experiences to grow an effective workforce.
- Support increased compensation and access to benefits to early childhood educators that ensure their needs are met so they can meet the needs of the children in their care, including access to child care for their own children.
- Uplift the Unifying Framework for the Early Childhood Profession so that educators have access to a professional pathway in their career that includes training, professional development, and recognition.
- Ensure educators' well-being is supported through access to mental health services.

** Indicates policy priorities that align with the most recent rule changes implemented by the Administration for Children and Families.*

Maternal & Young Child Health

This agenda was prepared by Groundwork Ohio with the thoughtful input of stakeholders across the state including the Groundwork Maternal and Young Child Health Advisory Council.

Ohio's health care and behavioral health care delivery systems, in combination with Medicaid, carry an enormous influence on the health and well-being of children, families, and communities. Without quality and timely access to care, children are at risk for adverse outcomes over the life course. Significant investments in service delivery models, care quality and diversity, and expanded access to Medicaid are required to reduce the risk of adverse outcomes while promoting strong and healthy development for Ohio's youngest children and their families.

In this agenda, we focus our policy priorities on investment, coverage and access, and expansion of resources. This agenda identifies key objectives and strategies to transfigure our health systems into a model that works for Ohioans, creating the greatest opportunity for positive impact on young children and families. Prioritizing health is essential to achieving our vision to make Ohio the best place to be a young child.

This policy agenda includes key strategies to address both immediate and long-term health care needs for individuals

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and families. While new and sustainable investments are essential to the success of these strategies, our health care systems' transformation requires more than funding, but must prioritize corrective policies and practices that uplift health equity. We recognize that marginalized communities bear the greatest burden of our flawed health care systems and are positioned time and again to experience inadequate access to quality, culturally appropriate care, high rates of perinatal mental health challenges with low rates of diagnosis and treatment, and far too many babies of color are not able to reach their first birthday because their survival is not a priority for investments.

The following strategies identify solutions to correct barriers to care access, bolster evidence-based programming, and expand health care coverage to improve the health and well-being of our most vulnerable populations. **The red text areas in this policy agenda represent Groundwork Ohio's key budget priorities for the FY26-7 State Budget**

We are committed to working with policymakers, families, professionals, and communities to accomplish the following:

1. Improve health outcomes for moms and babies.

- **Invest in strategies to meaningfully reduce infant mortality in Ohio with a focus on reducing Black infant mortality.**

→ **Invest in community impact models, such as those utilized by Cradle Cincinnati, Queen's Village, and Mama Certified to encourage active, locally based community collaboration between women, clinicians, hospitals, managed care, and other community partners together to reduce disparities in infant and maternal mortality.**

→ **Expand evidence-based home visiting programs (Nurse Family Partnership, Healthy Families America, Parents as Teachers) including scaling Family Connects statewide, utilizing Medicaid to leverage access and impact.**

- **Improve the quality of health care services during pregnancy and birth for Medicaid eligible women.**

→ Invest in piloting Mama Certified in additional communities to ensure that Black parents are heard, respected, and represented, and offered the highest level of care in all birthing hospitals and health systems work collaboratively across sectors and increase data transparency.

→ Expand and implement use of Alliance for Innovation for Maternal (AIM) to include all 8 patient safety bundles and incentivize participation in Birthing-Friendly hospital designation to support quality improvement during pregnancy.

→ Evaluate and improve funding and Medicaid rates for clinical providers to strengthen provider networks so that Medicaid eligible pregnant women and young children have access to high quality health care.

- **Ensure children enrolled in Medicaid receive comprehensive preventive care.**

→ Implement multi-year continuous coverage for Medicaid eligible young children age birth to three and expand continuous coverage for young children up to 6 years old.

→ Expand Medicaid coverage for young children to 300% FPL and other special populations of underserved young children.

→ Evaluate policies to increase well visits among Medicaid-eligible young children including the Outcomes Acceleration for Kids Learning Network (OAKs) model to improve well-care visits for infants aged 0-15 months.

→ Eliminate lead poisoning in Ohio through comprehensive, universal screening, testing, primary prevention, remediation, and supportive services for children impacted by lead poisoning.

→ Explore strategies to reduce the impact of smoking and vaping on pregnant parents and young children.

2. Expand access to mental and behavioral health services for parents and young children.

- **Build the professional workforce to meet the growing demand for infant-early childhood mental health (IECMH) services.**

→ Develop and adopt a crosswalk from DC:0–5 to ICD-10 and DSM-5 to facilitate Medicaid reimbursement for infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) services.

→ Support innovative education, recruitment and retention programs.

→ Build upon Ohio's infant mental health credentialing program by joining the Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health (AAIMH).

- **Expand access to quality mental health care services for very young children and their caregivers.**

→ Increase access to Help Me Grow evidence-based home visiting programs.

→ Increase or enhance referrals to mental health services following positive screen for mental health challenges for postpartum mothers.

→ Expand the utilization of behavioral health peer to peer models for parents with mental health conditions.

- **Improve upon the early childhood system of care by enhancing mental health care coordination for Ohio's youngest.**

→ Expand funding to early childhood mental health consultation by increasing funding through avenues that can reach all children and are not limited to location-specific services.