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**Ohio House of Representatives
Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services
Testimony on House Bill 33**

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Chairman Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston and members of the committee, my name is Patricia Gleason and I am the Chief Operating Officer of Learning Grove. Learning Grove is a member and supporter of Groundwork Ohio. Groundwork has submitted detailed testimony, and we support their recommendations and will not repeat them.

Learning Grove is a key nonprofit 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 region's largest provider of publicly funded child care.

Even before the pandemic, child care struggled. I heard repeatedly at public hearings that the child care industry just needed better financial management to work. Let me assure you that Learning Grove has had excellent financial management through the leadership of highly talented Chief Financial Officers, as well as Boardmembers from and partnerships with leading accounting firms. But good financial leadership does not change basic market realities. Ohio does not invest enough in child care to make it possible to provide quality care for publicly funded children, particularly for infants and toddlers.

Learning Grove makes use of every available public and private funding source – local, state and federal. We are lucky to have an excellent partner in Cincinnati Preschool Promise, and an electorate who has voted repeatedly to tax themselves for preschool. We are creative in how we layer and blend funds, and we maximize resources from other programs to support the health and well-being of our children and their families. But we have only been able to continue to provide child care because we raise private support for 10 – 20% of our budget each year.

And that is no longer enough. Like most businesses, child care has a workforce crisis. Learning Grove has closed six of twenty programs since the pandemic, and we are at imminent risk of closing another. We currently have 22 open positions and could serve as many as 100 more children if it was possible to find qualified teachers. In addition to competing with public schools for teachers, child care now competes with low level service jobs as those industries increase their salaries to respond to market conditions.

This should concern every member of the legislature because it impacts Ohio in two critical ways.

First, Ohio is trying to attract skilled manufacturing workers to the state at the same time it is rapidly losing child care capacity as teachers leave jobs for better pay in other professions. ***Child care is the workforce that supports all other workforces.*** Engineers, factory workers, construction workers, accountants, bankers, police officers, doctors and nurses all need child care to be able to do their jobs.

Second, is the undeniable impact of quality child care and preschool on brain development and school readiness. When I started working with publicly funded child care in Ohio in the 1980s the emphasis was on low cost babysitting so welfare-dependent mothers could work. In the 1990s the brain research confirmed

what child care professionals already knew. 90% of the human brain is developed by age 5. Public investment in the earliest years of a child's life provides the biggest return on investment in both human and financial cost.

Ohio, like other states, developed standards for measuring the effectiveness of child care programs that set ratios of children to adults and required specific training and education for teachers. Before COVID nearly all child care centers in the state were part of the quality rating system and had at least one star, and many others were more highly rated. We are proud to say all of Learning Grove's centers have the highest quality rating possible.

Since COVID you can read about the crisis in child care in every local and national newspaper. The pandemic exposed the consistent underspending on child care by both federal and state governments. It revealed that rather than becoming the foundation of a strong education system for children, enabling them to start K-12 on track to succeed, child care is struggling simply to stay open as teachers are forced into other jobs in order to make a living.

As a child care professional I am increasingly concerned that rather than addressing the continued underfunding, some legislators are talking about relaxing child care standards, including reducing the age and training levels required for teachers. Please do not do that. The children and parents we enroll now are facing unique economic, health and mental health challenges. We need qualified and trained teachers more than ever to address these complex needs. Everything we've learned about the importance of child care to getting young children prepared for school shows that trained and educated teachers are critical.

At Learning Grove we see every day the toll that an underfunded child care system takes on working parents struggling to make ends meet, and on local businesses who can't recruit and retain employees without child care. We have long waiting lists of families from all socio-economic demographics unable to access care. Many families are desperate to work and tell stories about piecing together child care using relatives, friends and neighbors, which often creates negative consequences for the child's safety and development.

I ask that you support the Groundwork requested investments in infant and toddler care, the early childhood education grants and the increase in eligibility. But please understand that these investments alone are not sufficient. Ohio, like other states, must invest significant additional state funds in the early childhood education system to support our children, the workforce and our future.

I also urge support for a Department of Children and Youth. As an organization that works with many state and county departments that support families and children, we fully endorse the deliberate coordination of those services. Coordination streamlines processes, reduces redundancy and helps families address complex challenges.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. I am happy to answer any questions about my testimony or Ohio's child care system.

Sincerely,
Patti



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