

Ohio House of Representatives
Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services
House Bill 33
Holly Unger, Parent from Licking County
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Chair Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services, my name is Holly Unger, and I am a parent from Utica, Ohio in Licking County.

Today, I join with fellow parents and advocates from across Ohio in thanking you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony on House Bill 33, Ohio's FY 2024-2025 budget bill, regarding the state publicly funded child care program.

More than 24 years ago, I became a mother. The day I found out I was pregnant I was 3 months out of high school. I had a scholarship to Baldwin Wallace. I thought my world was crashing underneath me. I didn't know what I was going to do. I was still living with my parents. How was I going to raise a child? I was scared. My first encounter with Head Start was a few short years later as a single mom to a rambunctious three-year-old boy. I was looking for affordable child care and preschool and one of my co-workers suggested the Head Start program. I enrolled him into the Head Start program in Columbus, Ohio at that time. My little boy learned so much and had such a great experience that made his future bright with excitement to learn. All the while, I was able to work knowing he was in a safe and developmentally appropriate environment with caring and professional adults. That same little boy is now 21 years old with a building trades license and electrician's license. He also recently graduated at the top of his class from the Columbus Police Academy and we are so very proud of him and grateful for the early experiences he had when I did not have the resources to provide him with other opportunities.

Back in 2012, I was diagnosed with uterine cancer and was no longer able to have biological children. And I had always wanted to have a big family. I married my husband in 2014, and he'd never had kids or been married. Foster care was an incredible way for us to provide love and care to kids who needed it and have that unique family bond of having children together. We've had 65 foster kids in the last 10 years and I have 10 amazing kids. I only gave birth to one, and we adopted 9 of them. We have 3 sets of 3. How do you split those kids up? I can't lay in bed at night knowing that I have 2 siblings and the other sibling somewhere else. We got into foster care to give a child a warm place, give them a bed, give them hope, give them dreams. Head Start has continued to play an important role in that.

When my husband and I first became a foster parent to 5 little ones, we were looking for help to give them the best start in life. Two of them, twins, had been born premature and addicted to drugs. Given their significant needs and developmental delays, we were engaged in early intervention services through Help Me Grow. This is really where things changed for me. My husband and I learned the true depth of impact possible with Early Head Start and Head Start programs. These programs quickly became extended family and a community of support for our children and for us. My husband was engaged in father focused events and I began serving on my local program's Policy Council where parents have a say in the leadership and

operations of the program. Head Start focuses on the parents and families just as much as they do the children they serve because they know it's necessary to improve outcomes for kids. They gave us the tools to help make our children's life so much more than we could have imagined for them, especially given their challenges early in life. Our twins are reading and tested gifted and talented which gave them the opportunity to start kindergarten a year early! Many could have assumed they would have been behind, but through our support and the support of the community where Head Start played such a critical role, they are thriving. None of this would have happened without Head Start.

I am a mother to 10 amazing kids. I am a wife, a coach, and a teacher. I know we willingly accepted the responsibility of our children through adoption, but I would be remiss if I didn't share it has not been without significant challenges, especially financially. We get very little support, especially in relation to inflation and the significant medical needs of our youngest. When each of our kids were up for adoption, we could not have fully appreciated the challenges and diagnoses that awaited us in the future and the roller coaster ride it has been to get them the help and care they deserve. I could go on for days about each child and their needs. Five of our children require daily medication and one we must keep eyes on 24 hours a day because of epilepsy. Head Start has been a source of stability, strength and resources for our family as my husband and I fight for our kids to get them the help they need so that they can develop a strong foundation to serve them for the rest of their lives. I often ask myself, if we can't plant that seed and water it for them to grow then who will?

Thank you for listening to my story and please consider my family and the many families like mine who are absolutely invested in their children and still are so deeply challenged to access the care their children need. And I hope you understand the critical investment you can make in a young child's future as you recall my son, my twins and each of our children's incredible accomplishments already in their young lives thanks to Head Start. We ask you to invest in our shared future through increased state investment in infant-toddler child care capacity, preschool, increased eligibility for child care programs.