

## **Testimony on New Early Childhood Education Initiatives Provisions of House Bill 64, the Fy16-17 Biennial Budget**

Ohio House of Representatives Finance Subcommittee  
On Health and Human Services  
Representative Robert C. Sprague, Chair  
March 4, 2015

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Chairman Sprague, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the new early childhood initiatives within sections of House Bill 64, the Fiscal Year 2016-2017 Biennial Budget. I am Angel Rhodes, Early Education and Development Officer in the Office of Governor John Kasich. I work with the Ohio Departments of Mental Health and Addiction Services; Education; Health; Job and Family Services; and Developmental Disabilities in the area of early childhood to align agency programs, increase efficiencies, remove silos, implement best practices and improve quality. I also oversee the nearly \$70 million *Early Learning Challenge Grant* to build the state's early childhood infrastructure and improve early learning services to Ohio's children.

I am speaking to you today because it is important to look at early childhood initiatives in the budget from a holistic standpoint, understand the important role each program plays in the overall system, and understand how this early childhood system has been created in Ohio. As the Governor's Early Childhood Education and Development Officer, I am providing this holistic picture on the Early Childhood initiatives in House Bill 64 that are spread across the Ohio Departments of Mental Health and Addiction Services, Education, Job and Family Services, and Health; and thus I am testifying in front of several different House Finance Subcommittees .

In my testimony today I will provide information on:

- The Early Learning Challenge Grant which helped to build Ohio's Early Childhood system
- Ohio's economically disadvantaged early childhood population
- High Quality Childcare and Preschool
- Early Childhood Mental Health Counselor initiative

### **Ohio's Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge Grant**

Ohio was one of the first nine states awarded an Early Learning Challenge grant from the US Department of Education in 2011. After three rounds of grants, Ohio's award of almost \$70 million is still the highest of all states' awards, and we have completed the third year of the four-year grant. This grant allowed for an unprecedented opportunity for Ohio to focus deeply on improving state-level systems and creating infrastructure that support children from birth to five by creating birth to Age 5 developmental standards, assessments, professional development, data systems and a common rating system for preschools and childcare known as the Step Up To Quality- Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System. This grant also funded a number of important pilot programs that allowed the state to test several approaches to getting children ready for kindergarten. One of these successful pilots is the Early Childhood Mental Health Counselor pilot that I will discuss later in my testimony.

Ohio received this award because of the strong collaboration between the Governor's Office and state agencies that serve young children in Ohio. These state agencies include:

- Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services;
- Ohio Department of Job and Family Services;
- Ohio Department of Health;
- Ohio Department of Education; and
- Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities.

Ohio's Early Learning Challenge grant application laid out an aggressive reform agenda to close the kindergarten readiness gap for disadvantaged children. This will be accomplished by increasing access to high-quality services, improving the quality of early childhood experiences and measuring and reporting progress on the goals. These early experiences lay the foundation for all of the subsequent learning for a child.

Prior to the Challenge Grant, Ohio had a disjointed set of siloed early childhood programs with different goals, moving in different directions and maintaining little focus on quality. This system ultimately did not address the needs of the children served and left parents at a disadvantage when it came to making informed decisions for their child.

Thanks to a strong focus, much has changed in Ohio. As the third year of the four-year grant came to a close in December 2014, I am happy to say our state agencies have aligned their work to ensure all types of early learning programs and providers that serve children birth to age 5, are part of a coordinated system for early childhood education. As a state we now:

- Use one set of state developed child standards for birth to age 5 to ensure academic, social, emotional and physical development in young children served through the Ohio Departments of Education; Job and Family Services; Health; Mental Health and Addiction Services; and Developmental Disabilities;
- Hold all publicly funded childcare and preschool programs to common program quality standards with a common quality monitoring system;
- Provide coordinated high-quality regional professional development to early childhood professionals working in the areas of health, mental health, education, childcare, and developmental disabilities to ensure they have access to ongoing professional growth opportunities; and
- Have a comprehensive Kindergarten Readiness Assessment that will help us understand, beyond literacy, how to best support children in the birth to age-5 range so that they are ready enter to enter kindergarten academically, socially, emotionally and physically.

### **Ohio's Economically Disadvantaged Population**

It is helpful to understand the population of children that will be eligible for early childhood services in this budget. Ohio has approximately 420,000 children under the age of six living in families that have an income below 200% of the federal poverty level. Frequently, these families experience trauma associated with abuse, neglect and poverty. Research shows that experiencing these types of trauma can have a negative impact on brain development for children birth to 6-years old. Common problems for children who have experienced trauma include managing their emotions, outbursts, inability to trust, communication, forming relationships, interacting with children and adults, and being attentive.

We know from examining ten years of data from Ohio's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment that there is an approximately 25-30 percentage point achievement gap in the skills of high-needs children as they enter kindergarten compared to their peers. We know that children entering kindergarten significantly behind their peers are more likely to stay behind through grade-three and the gap continues to grow over time. According to the Ohio Department of Education, these children are also more likely to exhibit behavior problems, be identified as needing special education, perform poorly academically in grade school, be expelled or drop out of high school, and earn less as adults.

Research shows that children who participate in high quality early learning and development programs demonstrate enhanced language skills and improved reading and math skills through grade three. They also are less likely to be retained in the early grades and less likely to be referred for special education services. It is critical that we work to provide as many economically disadvantaged children as possible with access to high quality early childhood programs to help assure that each of our children, especially children with economic disadvantages, enter kindergarten ready to be successful academically, socially, emotionally and physically.

### **Holistic Approach to Early Childhood in HB64**

Our work on the Early Learning Challenge grant has taught us that in order to successfully move our early childhood system forward, we must take a holistic approach to creating new, or expanding current, initiatives. This is reflected in the Governor’s early childhood proposals in House Bill 64 that expand high quality preschool slots through the Ohio Department of Education, removes barriers through Job and Family Services and addresses behavioral problems and expulsion rates through Mental Health and Addiction Services.

### **Increasing Access to High Quality Preschool**

With the successful expansion of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) preschool program (the Department of Education’s line item 200408) in FY14 and FY15, Ohio doubled the number of income-eligible children receiving high-quality preschool services from 5,700 to 11,090. The program also expanded beyond just public districts to include child care programs licensed by the Department of Job and Family Services and chartered nonpublic school programs. ECE-Preschool is now offered by 377 providers throughout Ohio. High-quality preschool includes requirements for a locally selected research-based curriculum aligned to the new early childhood standards, use of assessments to inform instruction, health and developmental screenings, teacher credentials and family engagement.

The Executive Budget in House Bill 64 will triple this funding from FY13 levels by appropriating an additional \$40 million over the biennium to provide high-quality ECE-preschool. The Executive Budget in House Bill 64 proposes to increase the level of funding in FY16 by \$15 million and increase the funding by another \$10 million in FY17. The new funds will be distributed across the state to high needs areas identified through three indicators: high levels of poverty, low kindergarten readiness scores and low 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading scores. The Department of Education expects to serve approximately 6,125 additional children in FY17, over FY15, with this added funding, bringing the total number of children served to more than 17,000.

To move toward the goal of providing all economically disadvantaged children with access to at least one year of high quality preschool, in FY17 the ECE preschool program will transition to provide services only to economically disadvantaged 4-year-old children. Through this FY16-17 expansion in ECE preschool funding, along with existing high quality publicly funded child care and federal Head Start, Ohio will be serving approximately 70 percent of its population of 4-year-old children in families with incomes below 200% of poverty.

Table 1: Preschool Picture for Ohio as of FY17 - There are approximately 70,000 4-year olds living below 200% of the federal poverty level

	Provider Type	# of slots available
1	ODE – ECE Preschool slots	17,215
2	ODE - Special Ed Preschool slots	7,419
3	Head Start preschool slots for 4-yr olds	20,065
4	JFS slots for 4-yr olds in full-time high quality childcare which includes preschool	3,542
5	Total number of existing preschool slots for 4-year olds* (lines 1,2,3,4 combined)	48,241

- This does not account for potential double counting of students that may be in more than one program

## **Removing Barriers to Moving Up**

The lack of access to affordable, quality childcare is a barrier for getting economically disadvantaged children ready for kindergarten and it remains one of the top employment barriers to low-income parents. Not having childcare is a barrier to their getting a job. The Governor's budget proposes three new strategies for removing this barrier:

1. Many families below 100 percent of the federal poverty level cannot afford the current copays for child care. The state will allocate \$7 million in TANF each year of the biennium to cover the copays for families making less than 100 percent of the federal poverty level. This will (1) make it easier for low-income families to get child care while they go to work and (2) align the child care with preschool education to help simplify the system for parents and ensure that they receive the same experience regardless of which door, Job and Family Services or Ohio Department of Education, they enter.
2. The sudden loss of subsidized child care if a parent or family's income exceeds 200 percent of the federal poverty level (approximately \$3,298 a month for a family of three) can actually prevent some parents from taking a better-paying job and moving up the economic ladder. The childcare cliff is the largest cliff in the subsidized benefits programs. The Executive proposal appropriates \$4 million dollars a year to remove this cliff which serves as a barrier to economic advancement by allowing families to keep subsidized child care with a gradually increasing copay scale up to 300 percent of the federal poverty level (approximately \$4,948 a month for a family of three).
3. Currently the entrance eligibility requirement for the subsidized childcare program in Job and Family Services is 125% of the federal poverty level, while the entrance for most other subsidized programs in Job and Family Services is 130% of the federal poverty level. The state will allocate \$3 million in TANF a year to align these subsidized programs by moving the childcare eligibility to 130% of the federal poverty level.

## **Early Childhood Mental Health Counselors**

As I previously stated, Ohio has approximately 420,000 children under the age of six living in families that have an income below 200% of the federal poverty level. Frequently these families will experience trauma associated with abuse, neglect and poverty. Research shows that experiencing these types of trauma can have a negative impact on brain development for children birth to 6-years old. The impact of trauma on young children can have a lasting effect on their emotional and academic wellbeing. Children who have experienced trauma will commonly have emotional reactions and exhibit behaviors that make it difficult for them to learn, and these behaviors can also have a negative impact on the learning environment for other children in that class. Of further importance, preschool expulsion rates are higher than k-12 expulsion rates.

To help address these issues, Ohio implemented an Early Childhood Mental Health Counseling pilot as part of the Early Learning Challenge grant. Through this pilot, the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services contracted with local mental health agencies and county boards to hire Masters-level mental health practitioners, who had also obtained Ohio's Early Childhood Mental Health credential, to respond to requests for support from early childhood teachers and staff. The Early Childhood Mental Health Counselors provided classroom observations, social and emotional developmental screenings, evidence based interventions, and staff training with the goals of reducing problematic behaviors in the classroom, teaching positive behaviors and reducing the expulsion rate. While these services were limited due to it being a pilot, whenever utilized, problem behaviors and the need for expulsion for economically disadvantaged children decreased leaving these children to be retained in the early learning settings.

The Early Childhood Mental Health Counselors in the pilot also provided regional professional development opportunities for all professionals working with children in the birth to five age range.

Topics for the professional development included, but were not limited to: resiliency, emotional regulation, mental health101, positive behavioral supports, family engagement, brain development, and the impact of trauma on child development.

As you have seen, the Executive budget in House Bill 64 is seeking to significantly increase the number of children that will have access to childcare and preschool. It imperative that we also provide the necessary supports to keep these children from getting expelled and to help the staff provide a high quality learning environment for children with diverse needs and experiences.

Based on the outcomes in this pilot over the past three years, we seek to expand this pilot statewide by providing \$5 million in each year of the biennium to make early childhood mental health counselors available to children, teachers and early child care staff statewide. The state would again contract with eligible entities including mental health agencies, hospitals and local mental health boards to hire and supervise Master-level mental health practitioners that have earned Ohio's Early Childhood Mental Health credential. Early Childhood Mental Health Counselors will be housed around the state, based on need and population, and there will be one central-intake phone number. An early childhood mental health counselor will make a site visit within 48 hours of a request to conduct observations and screenings, provide interventions, train staff to continue interventions, and develop support plans for children in need.

The Early Childhood Mental Health counselors will also continue to conduct regional professional development for larger groups on emerging topics and on best practices for addressing special needs, decreasing difficult behaviors, and teaching positive behaviors.

The Early Childhood Mental Health Counselors are a significant component of the state's overall early childhood approach in the executive budget. Their work is critical to keeping children in preschool and helping early childhood professionals create positive learning environments that lift children up and help them to be ready for kindergarten.

In conclusion, these new early childhood initiatives are all part of a complex, system of programs that will help economically disadvantaged children, birth through kindergarten, have access to the supports and opportunities they need to be ready for kindergarten and begin a successful path for life.

Chairman Sprague, this concludes my testimony. I greatly appreciate this time to provide information on this important initiative and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.