



House Extended Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education  
August 22, 2012  
Ocasek Building  
Akron, OH

Good evening Chairman Amstutz, ranking member Sykes, members of the House Finance Committee. My name is Derran Wimer and I am the Executive Director of the nonprofit organization Summit Education Initiative which works with all of the Summit County schools and education stakeholders along the education pipeline P-16 to improve educational outcomes. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you this evening about Ohio's school funding system and issues we believe impact the ultimate performance of all of the children in Ohio. I recognize that the purpose of this meeting is to focus on categorical and weighted funding systems within the Ohio School Funding system. I want to thank you for convening these meetings across Ohio and seeking input as you prepare to address school funding.

A thorough analysis of our funding practices, especially in our current challenging budget conditions, with an eye to an ideal, yet practical school funding system is incredibly important, on an individual level to our youngest citizens and yet is equally important to the well being of our entire state.

Today, I am here to present information related to the very youngest of our learners and how our collaborative work in Summit County could be used as a springboard for state wide efforts.

First I want to congratulate and thank you for having the foresight and preparedness to apply for and receive the major Race to The Top- Early Learning Challenge Grant for our state. Although these dollars are not designed to filter down to the schools and districts, the planning and development of a comprehensive approach to preschool education for ALL of Ohio's preschool children will be a huge advancement for Ohio. We are very proud that Summit County Preschool experts have been involved in the writing of the grant and continue to be involved in the program's development as experts in Early Childhood Education. We are fortunate to have Summit County experts in demand for consultation across the state. This rich resource is due in part to our county's efforts to address the needs of our birth-to-age five children through a cross sector, multi-year, public and private effort called "First Things First".

First Things First, led by Summit County Executive Russ Pry, is a multi-agency effort, funded by foundations and many different public agencies, to address five critical Early Learning

components: Early Care and Education, Health, Behavioral Health, Family Support, and Special Needs and Early Intervention.

The plan strives to address system gaps and to identify improvements needed to ensure young children in Summit County have the greatest opportunity for positive physical and mental health, early learning, and developmental outcomes, and to ensure families have access to needed support services.

Although there are many successes embedded in First Things First, perhaps the most significant is our community's commitment, through collaboration and alignment, to invest our efforts and local dollars into a comprehensive support system for our preschool children and their families. This investment in Early Childhood - ensuring that children enter kindergarten with a solid foundation - will result in significant gains in student achievement and reductions in remediation costs. The challenge is getting more four-year-old children involved in high quality preschools. We know that we could have a much broader impact if we could provide access to more children.

As you are aware, state funding for preschool is directed through categorical funding for school districts to operate preschool units serving students with disabilities through education and interaction with typical peers. This funding mitigates some of the costs associated with identification, assessment, program development, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy, health and other specialized services for differently abled preschool children. These services are combined with academic instruction aligned to Ohio's Early Learning Content Standards. The state funding for these preschool "units" permits a very small number of preschool age children to be served in public preschools. There are many excellent Head Start, Early Start, community-based and commercial preschool providers also serving the early childhood population. However, even with all of these providers, there are large numbers of children not able to access high quality early childhood education.

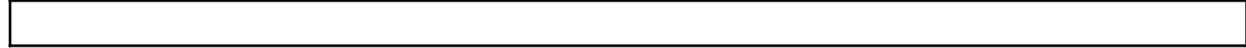
In today's world, a high quality preschool education is a necessity. The Early Learning Challenge grant is going to significantly improve the state wide system of Early Childhood Education providers to ensure a standard level of excellence and learner outcomes, regardless of whether the provider is public or community based. Parents who have the ability to navigate the preschool options and the family circumstances to access preschool for their children will have even greater confidence in the quality of their child's program.

Although improved quality of programs for preschool children is important, there are still many families with young children who are unable to access preschool at all. These low-income children are most at risk for not arriving at the kindergarten door with the skills needed to begin school successfully. We must make preschool available to ALL of Ohio's children. Gaps in access to quality preschool experiences often manifest themselves as readiness gaps when students enter kindergarten.

A state-supported, universal preschool program would ensure that quality preschool education is available to every child in Ohio. Such a program would promote school readiness by providing all children with access to developmentally appropriate learning experiences. Studies demonstrate that high-quality early childhood programs are especially beneficial to children from economically disadvantaged households.

The highly regarded Perry Preschool Program Study randomly selected low-income children for participation in preschool in the late 1960s. Educational researchers and economists have followed those students for years to understand the effects of preschool experiences on education and other quality of life outcomes. The data show strong advantages for the preschool-educated group in terms of gains in tax revenue, decreased involvement in the criminal justice system and lower welfare payments, all of which easily outweigh program costs. At a 3% discount rate, the

preschool programming repays \$12.90 for every \$1 invested from the perspective of the general public. There is a lifetime earnings differential of 11% for males and 19% for females who attended preschool. This obviously benefits the person's standard of living as well as the local and state income tax revenues. From a public health perspective, preschool was also associated with fewer health-related work stoppages, fewer health problems, fewer incidents of smoking or drug use, and a decreased need for substance abuse treatment.



Even with such compelling evidence of the importance of preschool, far too many Ohio children enter kindergarten without the foundation necessary for success in school. According to the Children's Defense Fund, children from low-income households enter school with one-fourth of the vocabulary of middle-class students. By the time he or she enters first grade, a middle-class child has gained approximately a 20,000-word vocabulary; in contrast, a child from low-income household has gained only a 5,000-word vocabulary.

These disparities in development along economic lines are found within our state as well. Ohio has required public schools to administer readiness assessments in literacy to all new kindergarten students since 2005. Not surprisingly, children from more affluent communities tend to come more prepared to learn. In fact, more than three quarters of Ohio's districts with the highest average kindergarten literacy scores in 2011 also had median household incomes in the top quartile of the state (data source: Ohio Department of Education power user reports). Increased access to high quality preschool programs for all students can reduce the gaps in preparedness that put students at a disadvantage before formal schooling even begins.

Relative to other states, Ohio seems unwilling to support early learners. According to the 2011 State of Preschool Report from the National Institute for Early Education Research, Ohio ranks 20th in terms of state spending in Early Childhood with an annual state dollar amount spent of \$3,942 per child as compared with New Jersey with \$11,669 per child (ranked #1), or the \$1,342 per child in South Carolina (#39). Ohio's total state spending on Preschool was \$22,467,862 in FY11; when adding all other resources, Ohio's rank for preschool spending dips to 26th.

In terms of access to preschool for four-year-olds, the same report ranked Ohio 36th out of the 39 states offering any state supported preschool programming. Ohio had a meager total of 2.4% of all four year olds in state supported preschool. In comparison, Florida, with universal, voluntary preschool had 76% of all four year olds enrolled in state preschool. Followed by OK 73%; VT 66%; GA 59%; WV 58%; WI 55%; IA 52%; TX 51%. Benefits of expanded state support for preschool include increased access for children and a greater consistency of results for schools. Clearly, Ohio is falling behind in terms of offering state supported early learning to four-year-olds. This is a situation which must be addressed, and with Ohio's cross sector effort to improve early childhood programming through the Early Learning Challenge Grant, we will have a robust system that should be made available to EVERY four-year-old in Ohio.

Universal, voluntary preschool would be a significant investment of education tax dollars as well as a bold budget priority statement. We would be investing our dollars in our youngest learners with the full knowledge that the ultimate "payoff" would be years away. But unlike other investments, the returns on preschool education have been strong for decades.

I am convinced that the investment of state dollars in early childhood education will result in major positive gains across many areas. I am specifically asking you to consider expanding preschool categorical funding to include universal, voluntary preschool education for all of Ohio's four year olds. Ohio is poised to make major inroads with early learning. We would welcome a state-wide funding commitment and believe that it would send an entire generation of children on to a much brighter and promising future.

Recognizing that state funds are scarce, Summit County, through our First Things First Initiative, would be very willing to be an “incubator” to demonstrate the power of early learning state funding. Specifically, Summit County has a robust network of public schools, head start programs, community based preschools, and commercial preschool providers. By operating in an established, community supported, coordinated, and accountable early childhood collaborative (First Things First) Summit County would be a willing and effective state partner to demonstrate a return on investment of early learning state dollars.

In summary, our state has a perfect opportunity to make a bold statement about education by supporting the outcomes and standards in the Early Learning Challenge Grant by categorically funding a high quality preschool experience for all of Ohio’s four year olds.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I am happy to answer your questions.