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Ohio Senate Education Committee
Ensuring Ohio Can Compete: Meeting Ohio's 2025 Attainment Goal
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Good Afternoon, Chairman Lehner, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the committee. I am Shannon Jones, Executive Director of Groundwork Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the critical role of early childhood education in meeting Ohio's 2025 Attainment Goal.

As you may know, Groundwork is Ohio's statewide policy and advocacy leader for early care and education. We believe that advancing quality early learning and development is the most transformative strategy to improve school outcomes, increase the life-long success of Ohio's children, and lay a strong foundation for economic prosperity in the state.

Our cause is shared by a very diverse group of stakeholders. Traditionally this coalition has included early childhood leaders, teachers, and providers, child advocates and private philanthropy. Over the last decade, however, the business community has become increasingly engaged in this work because Ohio is facing a workforce crisis. The business community joins with us because our state's future depends on our kids and they are simply not ready for success. As the recent Ohio Business Roundtable Report details, the business case for strategic investment in early childhood education is unassailable.

With only 40% of Ohio kindergartners entering the classroom ready to learn, it is not surprising that only 43% of Ohio's workforce has a degree or credential necessary for the jobs available today. To further complicate matters, in two short years, it's estimated that 65% of the jobs will require more than a high school diploma.

Our new economy requires new workforce strategies. Consider this: 65% of today's elementary students will have jobs that don't currently exist. The pace of change is so dramatic that even in the recovery from the recent recession, most new jobs have gone to workers with at least some postsecondary education, leaving many people behind.

This skills gap is an urgent problem that is shared by both urban and rural communities. This was demonstrated today by the data presented from the Cleveland Metropolitan School District and Ohio's Appalachian region. Their barriers to educational attainment may be different, but both communities are unified by the need to prepare children for kindergarten and subsequently for the future workforce by continuing their education beyond high school.

While this challenge does not discriminate between urban and rural students, we do know that some kids are far more likely to be left behind than others. For example, 46.2% of white kindergartners come to school ready to learn compared to only 23.5% of African American kindergartners and 22.3% of Hispanic kindergartners. This racial inequity that exists is alarming and requires special consideration.

Fortunately, we can look to empirical data to help solve this problem. The scientific evidence is clear--brains are built, not born. While a newborn's brain is equipped with roughly the same number of brain cells as an adult brain, it lacks the wiring of synapses to function properly. The most critical period in which cognitive, language, and sensory development is occurring—a time when the brain is most sensitive to learning and the brain architecture is taking form—occurs in the first 1,000 days of life. The foundation for skill development is established in the earliest years with 90% of brain development occurring between birth and age five.

It is also during this period when vital self-regulation and executive function skills take hold. This social and emotional learning arguably develops some of the most important skills. And these are the skills many of our business leaders seek in their workforce. Social and emotional learning supports the cognitive skills that help students learn academic content and apply their knowledge. They also contribute to the ability to persist through adversity, critically think and problem solve, and control one's emotions. High social and emotional competency increases high school graduation rates, postsecondary enrollment and completion, employment rates and average wages.

Over the decades we have learned much more about brain science and human development, while at the same time we have witnessed a change in our workforce composition. In 1940, fewer than 1 in 10 mothers with children under the age of 6 were working outside of the home. Today, almost 7 out of 10 mothers of children under the age of 6 are working outside of the home. That means that two-thirds of children under age six now have all residential parents in the workforce. As a result, more children are needing quality early childhood experiences outside of the home during the crucial time of rapid brain development, yet public policy too often doesn't recognize this fact. Public policy should recognize this shift in the workforce and focus on improving both the quality of the environments that children are in during their earliest years and the access to these quality, stimulating environments by our most at-risk kids to improve outcomes. The trend of women in the workforce is not likely to change. Ask any of the business leaders here today if they could operate without this labor pool. Thus, the priority of these issues in the public policy discussions must be elevated.

As the composition of our labor force continues to evolve, public policy also needs to recognize that not all children have the same early experiences. Poor children's ability to develop on par with their peers is greatly compromised—by age 3, low income learners have heard an average of 30 million fewer words than their high income peers and their vocabulary is half as large. Kids who start behind often stay behind. Higher earning families have the means to provide their children with high quality learning environments and they do so by choosing them in the marketplace. Lower earning families don't often have a choice. The evidence tells us that kids who receive quality early childhood education and care do better in school, are more likely to attend higher education, are better prepared for the workforce and explains why public investments made during the first five years of life for the most at-risk children are so significant.

Not only do investments in early childhood align appropriately with brain science, human development, and working family needs, but this alignment provides the best returns on public investment. In fact, Dr. James Heckman, a Nobel Laureate in economics and an expert in the economics of human development at the University of Chicago, recently analyzed the early childhood research and concluded that high-quality birth-to-five programs for disadvantaged children can deliver a 13% per year return on investment.

For every one public dollar invested in these programs, there is a \$4.10 return through age 21 and \$9.20 through age 40. Based on the research, these estimates are conservative as they have not fully quantified the long term health benefits of these programs—experts estimate a 16-18% ROI as more thorough analysis is done.

Despite our increased knowledge and understanding of the brain science, the needs of working families and the economics of early childhood education, public policy does not adequately reflect this knowledge. For example, only 56.4% of the eligible children from birth to four years old, living at or below 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), are served by state funded child care or preschool. The insufficient reach of quality early childhood programs for these at-risk kids is a problem in both urban and rural communities. In the Appalachian community, for example, only 28.6% of eligible kids are served while, Cuyahoga County is only serving 56.9% of eligible kids. These numbers only reflect children living at 130% FPL or below, which for a family of 3 equates to \$25,546 per year. We know that high quality early childhood experiences are out of reach for families earning more than 130% FPL. In fact, according to a recent survey by Learn to Earn Dayton/Montgomery County, the number one reason parents did not send their children to preschool is because they could not afford it.

As you are tackling the immediate challenges presented by the workforce crisis, we ask that you consider brain science, human development, the changing needs of working families and the incontrovertible economic data when making targeted state investments with limited resources.

The bottom line is that all of this expansive research tells us that we need to make investments much earlier than our formal compulsory K-12 system recognizes. Old strategies of only investing in this system do not work as evidenced by the fact that nationally since 1980, we have doubled our K-12 spending while math and reading scores have remained

stagnant. We are failing at making strategic investments for our most at-risk kids where they will make the biggest impact—long before they enter kindergarten.