

Ohio  
United Way

## Legislative Priority: EDUCATION



Ohio's United Ways place the highest priority on working with systems and partners to ensure that children are born healthy, thrive in their early years and arrive at kindergarten ready to learn; and that parents/caregivers are supported.

The first three years of a child's life, when the human brain develops more rapidly than any other subsequent period, are a time of enormous physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language development. Research indicates that nearly 90% of brain growth occurs during these early years. The pace and outcomes of this growth depends on whether the child's eagerness to learn is stimulated by her/his environment and comprehensive child development is supported and on whether exposure to "toxic stress" and trauma is minimized.

Research also indicates that the window for dramatic growth in executive function skills is from age 3 to age 5. Executive function, including self regulation, relies on three types of brain function: working memory, mental flexibility, and self-control. These functions are essential for school achievement, for the preparation and adaptability of the future workforce, and for avoiding a wide range of population health problems. The critical factors in developing a strong foundation for these essential skills are children's relationships, the activities they have opportunities to engage in, and the places in which they live, learn, and play.

The research is clear that **quality** home visiting programs and **high quality** early learning environments are effective in preparing at-risk children for success in school, work and life. United Ways are the largest private investor in **quality early care and education programs** because we know it produces one of the highest rates of return of any human capital investment.

### Ohio United Way supports the following Initiatives:

Our main goal is that children from families under 200% of the federal poverty level have access to evidenced based home visiting and high quality early care and education programs. This requires that eligibility be increased to 200% and that fee structures below and above 200% are designed to support families until they are able to afford care for their children. It also requires the state pay no rated child care center less than the federally recommended 75<sup>th</sup> percentile of the most recent market rate, to ensure families have access to high quality experiences for their children. In 2016 only 1 in 7 Ohio children under age 5 who receives publicly funded child care were served in high quality settings. 2 out of every 3 children were in unrated care.

Goals should be set for Ohio's home visiting program, Help Me Grow, to increase the number of eligible children served each year and the program reimbursement that supports evidenced based programs.

Ohio ranks 45<sup>th</sup> in the United States for infant mortality. Though the overall rate of infant deaths per 1000 live births decreased to 6.8 in 2014, the rate among children of African American mothers actually

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increased to 14.3 per cent, making Ohio one of the worst in the nation in infant mortality disparity by race. It is important that existing and future programs support affected families.

We need to increase funding for *family-centered* early childhood behavioral health continuum of care including prevention, early intervention, treatment and family support programs.

State programs need to identify and utilize the strengths of families' and respect parents as their children's first and continuous teachers. Utilizing culturally appropriate practices allow programs to engage families as partners and support the parent while supporting the child.

**It is critical that all programs are accessible to working families, respect parent and caregiver choice, and are designed to meet the needs of working families by providing appropriate hours of care.**

### **Budget History and Current Needs:**

The state's **Third Grade Reading Guarantee** creates even greater importance for a well-developed early learning system in Ohio. National and local research shows that at-risk children who score well on kindergarten entry assessments continue that progress through third grade. Yet less than a third of Ohio's economically disadvantaged children are entering kindergarten ready to learn. In its Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Fund application, Ohio outlined comprehensive early childhood system reform which broadens the definition of quality, expands the outcome and assessment focus from literacy skills to holistic child development and places an emphasize on family engagement.