



**Testimony of  
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Chair White and Chair Cirino and members of the Study Committee on Ohio's Publicly Funded Child Care and Step Up to Quality Program, thank you for the opportunity to share with you today.

My name is Julie Stone, and I have the privilege of serving as the Executive Director of the Ohio Head Start Association. In Ohio, the Head Start community includes sixty provider agencies, with over 8,000 staff serving over 33,000 children in nearly 500 licensed centers.

**Ohio's Head Start providers believe that quality matters and that Step Up to Quality (SUTQ) is a unifying framework for Ohio's Early Care And Education System.**

**Yet as you consider the program, we believe, an alternative pathway for Head Start and NAEYC Accredited centers into SUTQ would save money and time by reducing the administrative burden on programs and the state.**

First let me give you a brief background. Because Head Start programs are funded federally to local grant recipients, many people are not aware of the critical role Head Start plays for Ohio's youngest children, ages 0-5, and their families.

**What is Head Start?**

**Head Start provides child-centered, family focused, comprehensive community-based services to vulnerable children and families.**

Head Start was established in 1965 as an evidence-based, two-generation program to break the cycle of poverty by providing preschool children of low-income families with a comprehensive approach to meeting their emotional, social, health, nutritional and developmental needs. Early Head Start was established in 1994 and provides parallel comprehensive services to children prenatal to age 3.

For the purposes of this testimony, when I say Head Start, I am referring to the Head Start preschool programs that serve 27,000 three to five year old children, and the Early Head Start programs that serve 6,500 infants, toddlers and pregnant women throughout Ohio.

Head Start promotes the school readiness of children from families whose income is less than the Federal Poverty Level. Families and children experiencing homelessness and children in the foster care system are also categorically eligible, and Head Start services are uniquely available to children with disabilities and other special needs. Services are provided in a variety of settings including centers, family child care, and sometimes the child's own home. Head Start programs also engage parents or other key family members in positive relationships, with a focus on family wellbeing. Parents participate in leadership roles, including having a voice in program operations.

Many of our 60 Head Start providers engage in Child Care Partnerships. For example, more than one quarter of our Early Head Start moms and children are served through partnerships. The Head Start program enters into an arrangement with a community-based center or family home Child Care provider where the partner is supported with resources such as funds, highly qualified staff, technical assistance, coaching, supplies and/or materials to provide services that comply with the Head Start Program Performance Standards.

**Why is Head Start a Foundational Component of Ohio’s Early Childhood System and a Key Workforce Strategy for Ohio?**

**Because Head Start prepares Ohio children for school and supports their parents in achieving self-sufficiency goals.**

The Ohio Head Start Footprint

| <b>Program Name</b>                                     | <b>Ohio Footprint</b> |
|---|-----------------------|
| <b>Head Start (HS)</b>                                  | <b>27,129</b>         |
| <b>Early Head Start (EHS) total</b>                     | <b>6,498</b>          |
| <b>Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership (EHS-CC)</b> | <b>1,604</b>          |

Additionally, half of Ohio’s Head Start providers operate Early Childhood Education slots funded by the Ohio Department of Education, and one third operate Publicly Funded Child Care slots funded by the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services.

Head Start has been a foundational part of the Ohio Early Childhood system for over fifty-five years, providing high-quality, comprehensive services to the families who need them most and who are the most difficult to engage, making us a key partner in building a strong foundation for Ohio’s families.

**Step Up to Quality is critical for Ohio's Early Care and Education System, because quality matters for children and families.**

More than 400 Head Start centers are rated high quality in SUTQ, and nearly all of those are five-star centers. Over 20% of Ohio's five-star centers are operated by Head Start programs.

We know from numerous studies that children who participate in high-quality care have higher IQ levels, greater economic success and lower incidences of obesity and chronic illness. Research also shows that quality care can help to close the achievement gap between poor and wealthy children.

With the challenges faced by both families and providers, now, more than ever, is the time to commit to quality and to invest in our Early Childhood Workforce to ensure the ability of families with young children to work, and to support the workforce of tomorrow with school and life readiness.

### **How Can Ohio Reduce the SUTQ Administrative Burden for Head Start Programs?**

**Head Start Programs and contracted partners are required to comply with Head Start Program Performance Standards at a level of quality that exceeds Step Up to Quality's definition of high quality.**

The Head Start Performance Standards address child learning outcomes and the classroom setting in addition to the health, nutrition, mental health and special needs of children and their families. The standards also support the role of the family and community in fostering school readiness and allow Head Start programs to create systems that work in local settings and meet local needs.

Head Start Standards require programs to establish program goals and measurable objectives in collaboration with their Governing Board and Parent Policy Council that include strategic long-term goals to ensure programs are responsive to community needs, and goals for the provision of all comprehensive services. This is accompanied by requirements for systems of ongoing oversight and ongoing assessment of program goals with annual reporting over the 5-year grant cycle, using data to inform practice, and extensive reporting requirements. This establishes the level of quality to which Head Start programs are held, in order to retain their federal grant.

The Office of Head Start out of Washington D.C. has a comprehensive Monitoring System that gives a multi-year perspective on program operations with a focus on performance, progress, and compliance, and opportunities for continuous improvement. The system conducts off- and on-site reviews, and disseminates its findings through formal monitoring reports.

Step Up To Quality standards are focused on school readiness, learning outcomes of children, staffing and classroom operations. These standards include requirements at the administrative level that support classroom operation. In addition, attention is given to family and community

involvement, as well as and health screenings and referral. Step Up to Quality requires specific and detailed forms, documents and reports.

Head Start programs complete assessments that are aligned with the Ohio Early Learning and Development Standards and the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework. Current assessment systems used by Ohio Head Start Programs provide data on learning outcomes at the child, classroom, center and program level, and data is readily available for teachers to use in planning and for staff to share with parents to help them see the development of their child and to support their learning.

Head Start Performance Standards exceed Step Up to Quality's definition of high quality in numerous ways, including

- 1) engaging parents and community members in governance structures, and multiple parent and family engagement opportunities in early education,
- 2) providing health, nutrition, oral health and mental health services beyond screenings by actively supporting and being held accountable for ensuring that families acquire needed services,
- 3) strengths-based family partnerships services,
- 4) services for children with disabilities and their families,
- 5) higher educational requirements for teaching staff,
- 6) a comprehensive professional development system that includes coaching, and
- 7) qualified staffing to support these additional services.

Step Up to Quality requires valid approaches but they are less comprehensive than Head Start requirements. Participation in the SUTQ program requires specific forms that are duplicative and create an unnecessary administrative burden for Head Start programs.

An alternative approach for Head Start and NAEYC Accredited centers is successfully being used in almost half of the states to streamline participation in their Quality Rating and Improvement Systems.

The Ohio Head Start Association has published a document that aligns Head Start Program Performance Standards with Step Up to Quality, and it demonstrates that the majority of Step Up to Quality standards are included in the Head Start Program Performance Standards. This alignment could be used to identify and eliminate contradictory or duplicative requirements for Head Start programs participating in Step Up to Quality. Ohio could create, as other states have, an alternative pathway for Head Start participants, which can include bringing them in at a high quality rating level as a starting point based on the comparison between the Head Start Program Performance Standards and the Step Up to Quality standards.

Another alternative is for Ohio to offer reciprocity for some or all Step Up to Quality standards for Head Start programs that are in compliance, accepting that some or all Head Start standards meet the SUTQ standards to achieve quality levels. Many states currently offer an alternative pathway by either assigning an automatic rating for certain programs, including Head Start, or giving Head Start credit for particular standards.

The Head Start community and our partners commend the state's current short-term efforts to reduce Step Up to Quality paperwork. We stand ready to engage with the state to suggest other administrative changes to reduce the workload to the system, including a process for multi-site providers that would allow for program level review of policies, procedures, hiring practices and other items required that are the same at all sites, leading to a further reduction in administrative burden on the licensing system as well as individual programs.

Head Start has a long and deep history of commitment to quality, and has a proven track record of achieving positive outcomes for Ohio's children and families in greatest need. Our role as a foundation of the state's Early Care and Education system is crucial to the success of all of Ohio's children and we look forward to continuing to find ways to build on the strength of our foundation on that behalf.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. Please reach out to me if you have any questions about the content of this testimony.