

Caring for kids in Ohio's budget

By Wendy Patton

Children in Ohio are less likely to be in publicly funded preschool or childcare than in other states. This makes it hard for struggling parents to work and it means that children here are less likely to enter school ready to learn. Ohio spends less on these essentials than other states and funding has fallen from peak years. While the current budget boosted spending, far too many Ohio families can't get the help they need.

The Department of Education's early-learning program provides public pre-kindergarten for some children whose families have income less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level (about \$40,000 for a family of three). Early education prepares children for success in school and work, which builds a strong, competitive workforce for the future. Between 2001-02 and 2013-14, Ohio's pre-K enrollment plunged by more than 15,000 slots. Today, just 4 percent of Ohio's low-income 4 year olds are enrolled, compared to a national average of 29 percent.

Public childcare is considered a work support or a human service because it helps struggling parents pay for childcare so they can work. Public childcare serves families with very low incomes. Initial eligibility is set at 130 percent of the federal poverty level (about \$26,120 a year for a family of three). This was improved in the current budget, but most states help a much larger share of struggling families. In 2009, Ohio's initial eligibility for childcare was 200 percent of poverty, so a larger share of families used to be able to get help. We need to get back to that level.

Ohio's early learning programs and public childcare programs are not aligned. Early learning programs are often part-time but working parents need full-time care. Eligibility levels are different. Children in early learning are accepted into a class for a year at a time (this is referred to as 12-month continuous eligibility), but public childcare moves children in and out of classrooms as parents' jobs change or end.

For comprehensive alignment we must raise initial eligibility in public childcare to 200 percent of poverty and provide continuous, 12-month eligibility.

Key findings

- Together, early learning and childcare funding rose by \$118.3 million in current budget.
- Funding for public childcare has not been fully restored to pre-recession levels.
- Other states are doing more for families and children.