



Contact: Wendy Patton, 614.582-0048

Ohio needs to improve how it cares for kids

Ohio is not investing enough in children, and as a result, children of low-income families here 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 are less likely to enter school ready to learn.

A new report by Policy Matters Ohio analyzes state investment in early learning and childcare over time, and finds that while the trend line is improving, there is a long way to go. The state increased spending in the 2016-2017 budget, but adjusted for inflation, funding has fallen from peak years earlier in the decade.

Pre-kindergarten is widely recognized as a key to helping kids learn and setting them up for success in school and work. It helps underpin a competitive workforce for the state.

“Ohio spends less on these essentials than other large states,” said Senior Project Director Wendy Patton, the report author. “Many Ohio families can’t get the help they need.”

Not only is Ohio behind other states in preschool and childcare support, differing eligibility standards between the two programs cause kids to miss out on the opportunities. Some parents can’t send their kids to half-day preschool because they don’t qualify for childcare assistance for the other half day. In addition, children in pre-K are accepted into a class for a year at a time, but public childcare moves children in and out of classrooms as parents’ jobs change or end.

“Between underinvestment and misalignment, Ohio is falling behind in developing the workforce of the future, which bodes ill for the state in a competitive global context,” Patton said.

For comprehensive alignment, Ohio should raise initial eligibility for childcare assistance to 200 percent of poverty to match allowed eligibility for preschool, and provide continuous, 12-month eligibility, the report says.

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*Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan state policy research institute
with offices in Cleveland and Columbus.*