



**The Ohio House of Representatives
136th General Assembly**

**House Children and Human Services Committee
Proponent Testimony, House Bill 484
Julie Stone, Executive Director, Ohio Head Start Association, Inc.
October 28, 2025**

Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and Members of the Committee—thank you for the opportunity to share this testimony as a proponent for House Bill 484 (a companion bill to SB 177 Blessing-Timken). My name is Julie Stone, and I have the honor of serving as Executive Director of the Ohio Head Start Association.

For 60 years, Head Start and Early Head Start programs have prepared Ohio's most vulnerable children for school and for life. Today, we partner with families in **every single county** of this state—children in rural communities, in small towns, and in our largest cities. We see families who are doing absolutely everything right—working hard, caring deeply for their children, and trying to build a strong future. But they cannot do it alone.

Behind every child we serve is an early childhood educator who unlocks learning, nurtures resilience, and gives parents the peace of mind they need to go to work. In Ohio, **more than 7,000 professionals** power Head Start programs and support more than **20,000 working parents** statewide.

But right now, we are losing these educators faster than we can hire them.

Head Start is foundational to Ohio's Early Care and Education ecosystem, where the median wage for a childcare worker is **\$13.44 an hour**. That's just \$27,960 a year—if they can work full-time. Many qualify for public assistance even while working full-time, caring for other people's children. And because they can't afford child care themselves, too many must leave the workforce when they have their own children.

It's not that they don't love the work—they **simply can't afford to do it**.

This workforce crisis has real consequences. Last year, **58% of childcare programs** in Ohio reported they had open classrooms sitting empty—not because there aren't children who need care, but because there aren't enough teachers to staff them.

And this isn't only a crisis for families—it's a crisis for Ohio's economy.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation estimates that Ohio loses **\$5.48 billion every year** because parents can't find or keep reliable childcare—**\$1.5 billion of that is lost tax revenue** that should be helping us build the future of this state. Nearly **60% of Ohio mothers** say that if they had access to affordable childcare, they would return to work or increase their hours.

This is a workforce problem—and it requires a workforce solution.

That is why I am here today in strong support of House Bill 484 (HB 484 (a companion bill to SB 177 Blessing-Timken). This legislation establishes the **Workforce Investment Now for Child Care pilot program**.

HB 484 does two things:

First, it allows childcare workers to qualify for childcare assistance **based on income or by working 20 hours a week** in a licensed childcare program.

Second, it supports those who care for our youngest children—so they can stay in the jobs we so urgently need them to fill.

This approach doesn't just help one family at a time—it **helps hundreds**, because every educator who remains in this profession keeps **an entire classroom open**.

We see this in Kentucky, where a similar program has already helped retain nearly **3,000 childcare workers**, creating **14,000 to 40,000 new childcare seats**. Kentucky is half our size—if they can do this, Ohio can do better.

This bill is just one of the policy steps needed to make child care and early child education work for Ohio's children and families.

Head Start agencies have resources to compensate educators at higher rates than other providers, and we are well positioned to support and strengthen this pilot through our existing partnerships with childcare centers and family childcare homes across Ohio. When we can keep childcare workers in the field, we can expand services, lift quality, and help parents keep earning a paycheck.

I want to leave you with a final thought.

Every day, I meet educators who show up for children with joy, patience, and a deep belief in their potential. They help a toddler speak her first words. They comfort a child whose life has been too hard for someone so small. They teach kids to count, to share, to dream. They are building the very workforce Ohio says it needs to compete and grow.

But if we don't act now, those classrooms will go dark. Parents will keep leaving jobs they want and need. And Ohio will continue to lose billions of dollars in productivity.

HB 484 is not about a handout. It is about **respect**. It is about **economic growth**. It is about **Ohio's future**.

We must support the workforce that supports everyone else's workforce.

Chairwoman White and members of the Committee, thank you for your time, your leadership, and your commitment to Ohio's children and working families. I respectfully ask for your support of House Bill 484—and I would be honored to answer any questions you may have.

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The Ohio Head Start Association, Inc. (OHSAI) is the voice of Ohio's Head Start grantees, staff and families. OHSAI strives to keep the Head Start community informed, build collaborative relationships, partner with coalitions at the state and federal level, and takes a stand on issues affecting low-income children and families.