



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

**House Children and Human Services Committee  
Interested Party Written Testimony, House Bill 647  
Julie Stone, Executive Director, Ohio Head Start Association, Inc.**

Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and Members of the Committee - thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony regarding House Bill 647. My name is Julie Stone, and I serve as Executive Director of the Ohio Head Start Association, representing Ohio's 59 Head Start and Early Head Start programs serving nearly 25,000 children across urban, suburban, rural, and Appalachian communities.

Head Start works for Ohio because it functions not only as an early learning program, but as essential workforce infrastructure that supports families, employers, and local economies in every region of the state. More than 7,000 professionals are employed within Ohio's Head Start programs, and the stability of those classrooms directly affects the ability of tens of thousands of parents to remain in the workforce. When child care is reliable and well-managed, parents are able to work consistently, employers retain staff, and communities experience greater economic stability. When instability occurs, the ripple effects extend far beyond a single classroom.

For that reason, public trust in the publicly funded child care system is foundational. As Director Wenthe outlined in her testimony, Ohio operates a large and complex publicly funded child care system that requires consistent oversight, clear standards, and coordinated enforcement in order to protect both children and taxpayer dollars. Head Start programs are deeply familiar with this level of accountability. Federal Head Start grantees undergo annual independent fiscal audits, comprehensive federal monitoring reviews, strict eligibility verification procedures, detailed attendance documentation requirements, and extensive health and safety inspections. Participation in publicly funded systems carries responsibility, and Head Start programs have long embraced that responsibility as part of our commitment to children and families.

The data Director Wenthe shared reflects that the vast majority of Ohio's child care providers are operating in good faith and meeting their obligations. Fraud is not a defining characteristic of this system; it is the exception. At the same time, even isolated misuse of funds undermines public confidence and diverts resources away from children who depend on them. Honest providers are best protected by a system that identifies and addresses bad actors while affirming the integrity of those who are compliant.

From a Head Start perspective, strong oversight reinforces the effectiveness and importance of our comprehensive approach to services. When program integrity is clear and consistently applied, public confidence increases, investment is sustained, and employers can rely on child care as a dependable support for working parents. Families benefit when they can trust that their children are in programs that meet both safety and fiscal standards, and that eligibility determinations and payment systems are managed responsibly. Communities, particularly those in rural and Appalachian areas where Head Start may represent one of the primary early learning options, rely on a system that is both accountable and stable so that access to care is preserved.

As the General Assembly considers HB 647, we view the bill within that broader context of strengthening integrity while maintaining stability. We appreciate Director Wente's emphasis that Ohio's oversight structure is active and evolving, and that additional tools should build upon safeguards already in place.

It is also important to recognize that Ohio's early care and education system continues to experience workforce strain, with many providers facing staffing shortages that limit available classroom capacity. In that environment, clear standards, consistent enforcement, and predictable processes are essential not only for compliance but for maintaining provider viability and protecting family access to care. Oversight and stability are not competing priorities; when thoughtfully implemented, they support one another.

Head Start programs stand ready to continue partnering with the Ohio Department of Children and Youth and the General Assembly to ensure that publicly funded child care in Ohio remains accountable, transparent, and sustainable. Protecting children, supporting honest providers, and safeguarding taxpayer dollars are shared responsibilities, and they are central to ensuring that Head Start continues to power Ohio's workforce, strengthen families, and anchor communities across our state.

Thank you for your leadership and your continued commitment to Ohio's children and working families. I appreciate the opportunity to share our perspective and am available to respond to any questions.

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*The Ohio Head Start Association (OHSAI) is the unified voice for Ohio's Head Start and Early Head Start grantees, staff, and families. We connect and inform the Head Start community, foster strong collaborative partnerships, and engage with state and federal coalitions to advance policies that support young children, families and communities.*