



CUYAHOGA COUNTY
Office of Early Childhood/
Invest in Children



Study Committee on Ohio's Publicly Funded Child Care and Step Up to Quality Program

**Cuyahoga County Office of Early Childhood – Invest in Children
Interested Party Testimony
March 13, 2022**

Thank you, Co-Chairs Senator Cirino and Representative White, and Committee members for this opportunity.

My name is John Ladd and I am a Program Officer with Cuyahoga County's Office of Early Childhood, and Invest in Children. Invest in Children is a key stakeholder in Step Up To Quality (SUTQ) due to our work as Cuyahoga County's public/private partnership that mobilizes resources and research to ensure the well-being of all young children in our county. We urge you to carefully consider the needs of families with young children in the recommendations you will be creating for the future and scope of SUTQ.

It has been thoroughly established through multiple independent program evaluations and studies that improvements in Kindergarten readiness are realized through investments that increase quality in childcare and preschool settings and experiences. The focus of our comments here will be on two other important benefits of a robust SUTQ program -- the leveraging of local resources committed in partnership with the State, and that of an independent and objective standard of quality parents can rely on when making care and education decisions.

For over 21 years, Cuyahoga County and the State of Ohio have made transformational investments in our early childhood system. Our significant local investment of over \$148,000,000 in high-quality preschool since 2007 has built upon the state investments to work in an effective partnership for better outcomes. Our most visible example of this is our Universal Pre-Kindergarten program (UPK) which only includes providers deemed high quality in SUTQ. The SUTQ system has been the crucial foundation upon which UPK was built, and we now have the capacity to serve almost 5000 children per year. Our most recent evaluation showed that children who spent at least 18 months in our program, were 2.5 times more likely to be ready for Kindergarten than children who were in the matched comparison group of preschools.

All systems benefit when local and state agencies collaborate and contribute to the costs and leadership of the programs families rely on. Working in partnership (and we include parents as partners) each of us brings necessary components to the table. SUTQ strongly supports this partnership, by providing local

public and private funders a much-needed independent and objective standard of quality upon which they can rely when deciding where limited dollars can have the biggest impact. In the absence of an independent and objective quality rating system -- or if such a system were rendered ineffective through inadequate funding or by being made fully optional -- we would essentially be flying blind in our efforts to direct dollars into early childhood programs that are accountable for outcomes. How could we have ever proved UPK was making a difference if we had to conduct our evaluation within an incomplete patchwork of differing quality standards and definitions?

Let me share a recent example of this partnership in action. Based on the results we've seen, Cuyahoga County recently decided to expand the UPK program and more than double the number of children served. The county committed \$10,000,000 new public dollars to the expansion and challenged our philanthropic and business community to match that. They responded enthusiastically and exceeded the goal by more than 20 percent to donate \$12.5 million! They understood we were achieving something important, *and because of SUTQ*, they had the confidence their dollars were supporting high-quality programs.

Much as funders rely on SUTQ, so do parents. Without SUTQ to guide them, parents have no independent or unbiased source of information. While some parents have the ability and resources to research their childcare or preschool options -- and know what quality looks like -- most do not. Certainly, our most disadvantaged young parents rarely have the knowledge upon which to do an evaluation of quality when choosing where to send their child. They need an easily accessible proxy on which to rely. In that way, a robust SUTQ program provides a critical resource in supporting social equity in early childhood program accessibility.

In conclusion, it matters little to parents if a program is a federal, state or local effort. What they value, need and expect is quality and accessibility. Local programs working in partnership with the state, through initiatives such as SUTQ, can and *do* meet that expectation every day.

Thank you for your time and attention to the important challenge before you. I'd be happy to answer any questions.