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February 26, 2015

House Committee on Education
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court Street
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Chair Doherty and Members of the Committee,

I am Swati Adarkar, President of the Children's Institute. Our organization is focused on ensuring Oregon children are prepared for kindergarten and successful learners in 3rd grade.

There is broad agreement across the state that Oregon's high school graduation rate is unacceptably low and that we have an urgent responsibility to ensure more children are on the path to receiving their high school diploma and pursuing higher education. What is more recent is the growing recognition that the foundation for third grade success and high school graduation lies in the earliest moments of development: prenatally and through the critical window of brain development in the first few years of life. The research is clear that the achievement gap is well entrenched by kindergarten, particularly for low-income children and children of color. And, if we are serious about improving our state's education trajectory, we must ensure more children receive the benefits of high-quality early education from birth through age 5 followed by a continuous and well-aligned set of experiences in kindergarten through 3rd grade. We have an opportunity through the Age 3 to Grade 3 Initiative to thoughtfully connect early learning to the early grades to improve Oregon's 3rd grade reading outcomes and reach our state's ambitious 40-40-20 goals. However, more funding for K-12 education alone won't effectively address the opportunity gap faced by our low-income children and kids of color. It's long past time to align our scarce public resources with the evidence and ensure investments and supports are in place that span the birth through 3rd grade years.

The Age 3 to Grade 3 Initiative would seed critical evidence-based strategies that are often overlooked. These include summer programming to prevent summer learning loss, kindergarten transition programs to increase kindergarten readiness, and family engagement to support parents and ensure children reach their potential. The strategies included in the initiative have a strong literacy focus by supporting language development, pre-literacy, and reading skills. Wisely, the initiative also provides supports for needed cross-sector professional development and alignment of standards to ensure improved results.

The Age 3 to Grade 3 Initiative would leverage the Children's Institute's recommended early learning investments in home visiting, preschool and the Kindergarten Partnership & Innovation Fund – and provide the alignment and continuity that is essential for improving 3rd grade reading outcomes.

The Children's Institute's top priority is a \$30 million investment in preschool for low-income children. The preschool investment would support expanding opportunities for high-quality preschool to low-income children, like many states have done, by building on Oregon Head Start Pre-K to also include a diverse mix of providers, including schools, child care and culturally specific providers if they meet high-quality standards. Oregon recently lost out on \$15 million in federal

funding because we lack this system. Seventy-two percent of low-income children in Oregon lack access to high-quality preschool. And, while we support full-day kindergarten, kindergarten is too late to begin addressing the achievement gap cost-effectively. High-quality preschool has a big return on investment and saves K-12 millions of dollars in remediation.

A \$5 million increased investment in the Kindergarten Partnership & Innovation Fund is our second priority. The Legislature approved this fund in 2013 and allocated \$4 million to start work in the 2014-15 school year. The dollars were allocated to 16 communities across the state that are working to connect the early years to the early grades. They are using the money for shared professional learning between early childhood professionals and early elementary teachers, for kindergarten transition programs, and for increasing access to preschool and family engagement opportunities, to name a few. The Age 3 to Grade 3 Initiative would allow these efforts to create a continuum of high-quality early learning experiences to expand to additional communities across the state.

We know that achieving widespread student success is dependent upon strategically linking high-quality early childhood programs for children up to age 5 with high-quality early elementary experiences for children in K-3. The Age 3 to Grade 3 initiative is an important step toward building this alignment and more importantly, creating a level playing field for our most vulnerable children to ensure more children read on grade level in 3rd grade and become successful learners.

But this will not happen without your leadership and support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Swati Adarkar". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Swati Adarkar
President & CEO
Children's Institute