

To: House Committee on Early Childhood & Family Supports  
From: Dana Hepper, Director of Policy & Program, Children's Institute  
Date: March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
Re: Preschool in Oregon

Members of the committee, my name is Dana Hepper. I am the Director of Policy & Program at the Children's Institute. Children's Institute is a statewide organization that advocates for investments in young children that will improve Kindergarten Readiness and Third Grade Success. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

We focus on the first 8 years of life because this is the period in which the most rapid brain development occurs. We know that gaps in opportunity are detectable by the time babies are 9 months and well-established by Kindergarten. Slide 2 shows the relationship between school readiness and income. Clearly, we must start earlier to close 3<sup>rd</sup> grade achievement gaps, and limited resources are most effectively targeted at low-income children and other similarly underserved children.

We are glad to talk with you about the status of preschool in Oregon. For over 10 years, Children's Institute has worked alongside the Oregon Head Start Association to support increased investment in Oregon Head Start Pre-Kindergarten, our largest state investment in preschool. We have focused our advocacy on preschool and other high quality early learning investments because consistent findings prove that these are among the most cost-effective educational interventions. Children who attended preschool show positive effects on outcomes that extend well into adulthood, such as high school graduation, reduced teen pregnancy, increased years of education completed, earnings, and reduced crime.

Early in 2015, our organizations worked with staff at the Early Learning Division and 34 other organizations and experienced practitioners to craft HB 3380. We were driven by concern about lack of access for children in households with incomes 100-200% and a lack of common understanding of quality across preschool providers. The legislature passed HB 3380 in 2015 and provided \$17 million in start-up funding for Preschool Promise and \$9 million to expand Oregon Head Start Pre-Kindergarten funding. We could not be more excited that an additional 1300 children started attending a Preschool Promise classroom in the Fall of 2016, which compliments the 13,687 children enrolled in Head Start.

Despite the clear research and the Legislature's recent investments, we still have a long way to go. (Slide 3) Most recent numbers estimate that 62% of low-income preschool-age children in Oregon still lack access to a high quality, state-funded preschool, and are likely unable to afford tuition. This is more than 25,000 children in Oregon. The National Institute for Early Education Research lists Oregon as 31<sup>st</sup> nationally in access to publicly funded preschool.

As Early Learning Division Staff, Oregon Head Start Association Leadership, and the Children's Institute team met to craft the Preschool Promise statute and advocate for start-up funding, we agreed on a shared vision for Preschool in Oregon. Early data indicates that we are making headway toward these goals. These include:

- *Increase access to high quality preschool for low-income children and families in Oregon.* (Slide 4) This meant funding more slots and reaching into higher income brackets (specifically 100-200 Federal Poverty Level). You can see we are reaching these children and a diverse population in terms of language and race/ethnicity.

- *Create more mixed income classrooms.* This means children shouldn't only be attending preschool with other children in the same income bracket. Morality and research support this direction. This is also happening.
- *Diversify preschool providers.* (Slide 5) This means allowing preschool providers in multiple settings to be eligible for state preschool funding, including Head Starts, school districts, childcare providers, community-based and culturally specific organizations, Relief Nurseries and others. This provides more choice to families to find the best fit for their child and lives. We can leverage the knowledge and skills of these different sectors as they begin learn from each other and work together. We can have common standards for quality across diverse settings. And we can access the resources of these various provides, especially facilities. (Slide 6) We also see diversity in Preschool educators that is greater than the diversity of adults in Oregon. There is always more work to do in this arena, and we are excited about the Early Learning Divisions Workforce POP to make more headway.
- *Highly skilled and adequately compensated workforce.* Salaries in early childhood are notoriously low, and many early childhood staff qualify for early childhood public subsidies themselves. These low wages increase teacher turnover and stress, to the detriment of children. Salary requirements in Preschool Promise do not solve all the pay issues across early childhood, but they are a small step in the right direction to acknowledging the critical nature of the work with young children. As we build towards an equitable P-20 system in our state we strive toward equitable pay for early childhood educators. We are supporting Oregon Head Start Association's request to invest in their educator salaries and begin to lift the whole field.
- *Building toward a coordinated system.* Early Learning Hubs can help make it easy for parents to get connected to a preschool that best meets their needs by coordinating outreach and enrollment and sharing waitlists among willing providers.
- *Learn as we go.* We left some pieces of the legislation intentionally flexible to allow for learning to take place. This occurs through an evaluation of the program and feedback from implementers to the Early Learning Division.

As we continue to learn, children, families, providers, and communities are ready to grow our investment in preschool. (Slide 7) Children's Institute's Senior Research and Policy Director led a survey of Hubs to identify outstanding capacity to begin to address this unmet need. Early Learning Hub Directors who participated in the study indicated incredibly high demand from families and providers in their regions. Regions that have Preschool Promise funds reported that they could easily expand significantly. For example, one Hub director related, *"We want to increase the number of children served in Preschool Promise by ten-fold! We know how many low-income children and high needs 3 and 4 year olds are in our region, as well as the number of Head Start slots and there is a huge gap...we could triple our slots with minimal effort. The need and readiness is that high."* We heard similar sentiments from other Hubs. Overall, 15 of 16 Hub Leaders interviewed indicated that they were ready for expansion or to become a grantee in the next round. In total, Hubs estimated that they could expand by an additional 1,613 slots with minimal effort, an increase of 125%.

Despite the successes and challenges in the first year of implementation, the ELD, our Hubs, and providers have learned a lot during this first year of implementation. Today you will hear about both from distinguished panelists representing public schools, Head Start, Childcare, Hubs, and families. Thank you for your time. With that, I will turn it over to Superintendent Grotting.