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TO: Representative Karin Power, Co-Chair Joint Task Force on Access to Quality Affordable Child Care and Senator Kathleen Taylor, Co-Chair Joint Task Force on Access to Quality Affordable Child Care

FR: Cori Mielke, FACT Oregon, Vice Chair of State Interagency Coordinating Council and Heather Olivier, FACT Oregon, Member of State Advisory Council on Special Education

RE: Child Care Task Force and Vulnerable Populations

About Us

FACT Oregon (Families and Communities Together) is the Parent Training and Information Center for the state of Oregon. As the PTI, we work with families and youth with disabilities, help parents participate effectively in their children's education and development, and partner with professionals and policymakers to improve outcomes for all children with disabilities. Our mission is to empower Oregon families experiencing disability in their pursuit of a whole life by expanding awareness, growing community, and equipping families. As a parent-led organization, FACT Oregon recognizes the importance of connecting with another parent who understands the barriers a family might face raising a child(ren) experiencing a disability. Our staff support families through our shared experience raising children who experience disability.

Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education and Child Care

Decades of research has shown that positive early experiences are essential prerequisites for later success in school and life. High-quality inclusive settings coupled with early intervention can change the trajectory for children accessing Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education.

Children experiencing disabilities in Oregon receive services in a variety of settings including the home and community in which children without disabilities participate. In fact, the principles embedded within The Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act require that appropriate early intervention services are made available to the maximum extent appropriate to eligible infants and toddlers with disabilities in natural environments.

Despite extensive research that supports inclusive childcare settings, children with disabilities have experienced significant barriers towards accessing high-quality, inclusive childcare options in Oregon. According to a new report from the Center for American Progress, parents of young children with disabilities are more likely to experience difficulty finding child care, are less likely to secure a childcare spot, and are more likely to experience job disruptions because of problems with child care. This is often due to a lack of qualified caregivers, insufficient knowledge of how to implement accommodations, and, in some cases, caregiver bias. In child care deserts, this can be intensified for families. Frequently families have indicated accommodations for toileting, support for complex communication needs, and/or behavior support as reasons why they have not been able to access childcare. Recently, an Oregon Department of Education audit confirmed inclusive placements across the state were limited. Of the children who received inclusive placements, most were provided through Preschool Promise or Head Start Programs. Community-based organizations like Inclusive Partners and 211 provide support to families and childcare settings, but not all providers or families know about these valuable resources.

The Impact of COVID – 19

Childcare providers had to adapt quickly and respond to the challenges of providing safe spaces for children to access childcare during COVID – 19. We have seen instances of childcare providers becoming innovative and creative in responding to the needs of families and children. They have responded as community hubs by collaborating with community partners to provide resources and support to families in need. Unfortunately, that is not the case in all of Oregon. We have also seen Oregon's most vulnerable children and communities bearing the brunt of the pandemic. Historically underserved communities are more likely to face barriers to accessing childcare.

The impact of COVID-19 has highlighted and exasperated the obstacles that families of children who experience disability face. A trend that we have noticed from the calls that we are receiving highlights the barriers in accessing childcare for children who experience disability during this time. A parent shared, "My son attended a preschool last year, now they are saying that due to COVID they have

to shrink the class sizes and don't have the space/ staffing to support my child. I don't want my son to be a burden, I want him to be wanted at his preschool."

When families cannot work, they lose income and risk becoming unhoused, food insecure, and isolated, increasing stress within the family. The closure of childcare providers as a result of COVID-19 meant schedules and routines were disrupted abruptly causing dysregulation for children experiencing disability. A single parent, with a two-year-old boy who experiences autism, shared that her son's daycare closed. She is working from home and is no longer able to effectively do her work. Her employer is considered an essential business, making parts for medical equipment, so she cannot be furloughed. Her options are to resign and wait six weeks to be eligible for unemployment benefits or try to find an emergency childcare provider that can support her son's needs and has open slots.

Considerations

We appreciate Oregon's commitment to early childhood with the release of the early learning account funds that include funding to critical programs in early childhood. Conversations that happened as a result of the Student Success Act coupled with Oregon Department of Education's commitment to equity and inclusion prior to the COVID – 19 pandemic allowed many of us to feel like we were beginning to see some change in ensuring that historically underserved students would receive supports to reduce the disparities that exist. Let us not forget the direction that we started and ensure that we prioritize resources to our most vulnerable populations with a focused equity lens. Additionally, please consider the impact on families due to cross-sector budget cuts. Many families who have children that experience disabilities are involved in multiple systems including Developmental Disability services. With budget shortfalls and across the board budget cuts, we are concerned that our most vulnerable populations will be impacted to the point of crisis.

We understand that these are difficult times and that now more than ever we must all come together to support our children in partnership and collaboration.

Thank you for your commitment to ALL children in Oregon.