

FY 2026-2027 BIENNIAL BUDGET ISSUE BOOK

# CREATING A VISION OF CHILD WELL-BEING FOR OHIO



OHIO  
CHILDREN'S  
BUDGET  
*2026-2027*

March 2025



[www.ohiochildrensbudget.org](http://www.ohiochildrensbudget.org)





**While children make up 22% of Ohio's population, they represent 100% of Ohio's future. The budget is a moral document that reflects our priorities as a state - we must do right by the children of Ohio.**

Children do not come in pieces, and neither should our policy and budget decisions. We must maintain, protect, and strengthen the public resources dedicated to ensuring the wellbeing of our children in the 26-27 biennial budget.

To support the potential of each child, they must be cared for, healthy, educated, fed, and nurtured. Unfortunately, too many Ohio children are not adequately supported in all areas of their wellbeing.

**The Ohio Children's Budget Coalition (OCBC), a partnership of organizations across the state committed to the health and well-being of children, was established to advocate for the needs of the "whole child" in Ohio's budget decisions. Together, we are fighting for a fair and just children's agenda that elevates equitable opportunities for all children to thrive. OCBC's recommendations represent effective investments of taxpayer dollars that help children across our great state.**

State lawmakers and Governor DeWine's Administration must:

- Prioritize the whole child, including the communities they call home and the systems they depend on.
- Improve outcomes and eliminate silos by building a comprehensive, coordinated continuum of services and programs to address issues beyond the artificial boundaries of agencies and funding streams.
- Protect essential programs that promote whole child well-being. Maintain and build on previous investments that promote health, nutrition, housing security, quality child care, economic stability, strong families, quality education, and critical infrastructure, like broadband, that connects children and families to the services and supports needed during the pandemic and beyond.
- Advance budget solutions that prioritize racial equity and combat the effects of structural racism in our communities, which negatively impact child outcomes.
- Support the transition to adulthood. Childhood is a continuum and adolescent development continues through the early 20s. Many youth need additional support to successfully transition to adulthood.
- Ensure all investments go toward data and research-driven best practices, approaches, programs, and services that maximize benefits for children and families and represent an effective use of taxpayer investments.

**The Ohio Children's Budget Coalition wrote the following issue briefs outlining critical opportunities to improve child well-being in this budget.**

# OHIO CHILDREN'S BUDGET COALITION MEMBERS





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# Advancing Early Childhood Development in Ohio

Early childhood education is foundational to the success of children, families, and communities. Investing in high-quality early learning programs ensures school readiness, strengthens families, and supports workforce participation. This brief outlines key policy recommendations to expand access to childcare, reduce infant mortality, and improve kindergarten readiness in Ohio.

## Policy

Increased funding and policy changes are needed to support equitable access to quality early childhood education and care in Ohio. These recommendations align with best practices and evidence-based strategies to improve child outcomes and strengthen families. Head Start is the most successful, longest-running, national school readiness program in the United States. The program is child-centered, family focused, comprehensive, and community-based. Head Start provides comprehensive education, health, nutrition, dental, mental health, social services, and parent engagement opportunities to low-income, special needs and at-risk children and their families, and is making a difference in Ohio.

## Challenge

Ohio faces significant challenges in providing accessible, high-quality early childhood education and care. Limited childcare access affects parents' ability to remain in the workforce. Workforce shortages in the early education sector, driven by low wages and high stress, impact the availability and quality of services. Additionally, Ohio struggles with high infant mortality rates, particularly in rural and underserved communities, highlighting the need for expanded support programs.

## Opportunity

By implementing the policy recommendations below, Ohio can strengthen early childhood development, support working families, and improve educational outcomes for vulnerable children. Expanding access to publicly funded childcare and Head Start programs will ensure more families receive critical early learning services. Investments in workforce development and employer-supported childcare initiatives will help stabilize and grow the early education workforce. Addressing infant mortality through targeted investments in Early Head Start and home visiting programs will improve health outcomes for Ohio's youngest residents. These strategic actions will create a stronger foundation for children, families, and communities across the state.

## Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendations

- Increase eligibility for Publicly Funded Child Care (PFCC) to at least 200% of the federal poverty level and expand access to full-time preschool slots.
- Invest in public-private partnerships and tax policies that support employer-driven childcare solutions to help working families.
- Support the federal-to-local Head Start and Early Head Start funding structure, allowing flexibility for innovation to meet community needs.
- Allocate \$4 million in the state budget for an Early Head Start pilot program targeting rural and high-infant-mortality communities.
- Expand and strengthen home visiting programs through Early Head Start to support at-risk families and improve infant health outcomes.
- Increase funding for early childhood mental health consultation to better support children, families, and early childhood educators.
- Establish an early childhood education fellowship or apprenticeship program to provide paid internships and workforce development opportunities.
- Implement loan forgiveness and workforce support programs for publicly funded Head Start and childcare professionals.

This issue brief authored by Julie Stone, Executive Director, Ohio Head Start Association, Inc.  
Published: March 2025



## Child Lead Poison Prevention

Lead is a toxin. There is no safe level of lead in the blood. Childhood lead poisoning can cause irreversible brain and nervous system damage leading to learning and behavioral challenges, lower IQ, lower academic achievement, increased hyperactivity, emotional problems, and future delinquent behavior. Over 90% of Ohio's lead poisoning cases result from dust created by lead-based paint in houses built before 1978. Young children are uniquely vulnerable to lead because their rapidly developing nervous system has no defense against toxins. Thousands of Ohio children have already been poisoned and many more continue to be exposed to lead. Last year, 4,263 children tested positive for elevated blood lead levels (EBLLs), which is an undercount and does not disaggregate data by race. Ohio has the second-highest rate of children who test positive for EBLLs in the country

### Policy

The Ohio Department of Health (ODH)'s Healthy Homes and Lead Poisoning Prevention Program (OHHLPPP) conducts investigations to identify and abate lead hazards when children have an EBLL. All children must be tested for lead at ages 1 and 2 years if they are on Medicaid, reside in a high-risk zip code, or if other identified risk factors exist, but existing testing falls far short of this. ODH receives federal and state funding for the State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) Health Services Initiative (HSI) lead program, which supports some lead investigations and abatement, public education, and the Lead Safe Rental Registry. ODH relies on local health agencies to help implement the OHHLPPP; however, the lack of resources limits its effectiveness.

In the most recent state budget, \$10 million in new grants were administered by ODH via the Lead Safe Home Fund in FY24-25. ODH also manages GRF funding for local lead prevention including the Lead Safe Home Fund in Cleveland and earmarked funding for Toledo. There is also funding for the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DoDD) which implemented expanded automatic eligibility of early intervention (EI) for children with EBLLs. The Ohio Department of Development also allocated its share of ARPA dollars for lead poisoning prevention.

### Challenge

We know lead dust from lead paint is the most common source of lead exposure and yet Ohio does not require lead hazard remediation prior to children or pregnant women residing in a home. Instead, Ohio relies primarily on increasing public awareness and lead testing to identify and abate lead hazards after a child has been lead poisoned, rather than preventing them from being poisoned in the first place, relegating children to the proverbial "canaries in the coal mine." The COVID-19 pandemic posed an

additional challenge: keeping children inside their homes longer and further exposing them to potential lead hazards while also slowing down the number of children tested.

Childhood lead poisoning requires a comprehensive solution that begins with healthy housing. No single agency is responsible for all the factors that contribute to child lead poisoning. However, it is incumbent upon agencies to work together with local and community partners to implement solutions that have a foundation in primary prevention. Furthermore, we must continue to invest in EI funding so that we are taking care of the children and families who have already been negatively affected by lead. DoDD went from serving 56 children in its first year of automatic EI eligibility for children with EBLs to 327 children in FY22 and further growth in the need for EI is expected.

In accordance with CDC guidance, Ohio has lowered its lead reference levels from 5.0ug/dl down to 3.5ug/dl. The change has allowed ODH to identify more children exposed to lead earlier, allowing for a quicker response. However, this has led to a rise in the number of children testing positive for elevated blood lead levels, and it will be necessary to invest in additional resources to make sure children and families have access to educational information and supportive services.

## Opportunity

Governor DeWine recognizes the critical importance of primary prevention of child lead poisoning, identified as the “optimal strategy” by the CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics. However, despite important investments in the previous budget, Ohio still is not adequately funding its lead poison prevention efforts. Over two-thirds of Ohio’s housing stock was built before 1980, many in neighborhoods that bear the brunt of historical disinvestment. If we continue at the current level of funding, it will take over a century before Ohio rids itself of lead poisoning. The funding for the state Lead Safe Home Fund has been an important resource for local communities. Sixteen different projects were funded in FY 24 and FY 25, including 9 county specific projects. Given the program’s success, funding must be increased to help expand its reach to more communities in need. SCHIP continues to have a backlog with over 100 families on the waiting list and is still primarily abating houses where children have already been poisoned rather than its intended purpose of primary prevention. Particularly given how the SCHIP program leverages federal dollars, funding for this program should be maximized. Another opportunity to protect children from lead hazards at the source would be for the state to assume control of the federal Renovation, Repair and Painting (RRP) rule, which requires the use of lead safe work practices when conducting repairs in a pre-1978 unit. Granting ODH authority to manage RRP would offer a solid foundation for building a primary prevention approach. If implemented, these prevention efforts could save lives and increase job opportunities, ultimately saving taxpayer dollars.

## Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendations

- Increase Lead Poisoning Prevention Line Item to \$12 million in FY 26, FY 27 to support various initiatives administered by the Ohio Department of Health including the Lead Safe Home Fund.
- Expand SCHIP Lead Program for High-Risk Children (\$10 million/FY) to remove lead hazards in homes built before 1978 with children under 6 years of age or pregnant women. Increase current \$5 million to \$10 million/year.
- Allow Ohio Department of Health to enforce Renovation, Repair and Painting Rule to ensure contractors across Ohio are not inadvertently spreading lead dust when working in older homes. This will keep kids, families, and workers safe from lead poisoning.

This issue brief authored by: Tim Johnson, Ohio Lead Free Kids Coalition

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## Ending Homelessness for Children and Families

Homelessness in Ohio has [increased 30% since 2012](#) – an increase driven largely by a growing number of children entering the homeless system. Minors now account for 29% of the more than 76,000 Ohioans who experienced homelessness during a single year.

The longer a family is homeless the longer it takes them to regain stability and provide a healthy foundation for children to thrive. The most effective and affordable way to fight homelessness is to prevent it.

### Policy

Stable housing is universally acknowledged as a critical need for those trying to overcome addiction or mental illness, children aging out of foster care, people with disabilities exiting institutions, seniors facing premature nursing home placement and mothers trying to raise healthy babies. Over the years, housing providers have developed powerful strategies to divert people out of temporary shelters and into permanent homes.

Given the long-term, negative effects of housing insecurity on a child's health, education, and economic future, homeless children must be prioritized. The DeWine administration understands that safe, decent, affordable housing is the foundation for healthy children and families, stable communities, and a thriving economy.

- **Youth Homelessness:**

The Ohio Department of Health's youth homelessness program helps young people who are aging out of foster care or escaping unsafe circumstances to secure safe, decent, stable housing. The \$5.01 million appropriation in the executive budget is a decrease of around 36% from last GA due to the expiration of federal pandemic assistance funding. We urge the state to increase this line item to \$6.51 million in order to maintain the positive momentum that many communities have seen in recent years by coordinating housing assistance and age-appropriate services to move vulnerable youth out of homelessness and into permanent housing.

- **Healthy Beginnings at Home:**

Housing insecurity is one of the major factors driving Ohio's high infant mortality rate. Healthy Beginnings at Home, which provides time-limited rental assistance coordinated with healthcare and social services to extremely low-income pregnant women and new mothers in Dayton, Akron, and Cleveland, has proven that these interventions significantly improve birth and health outcomes. The state should provide a final appropriation of \$2.5 million to complete this project for the families and children who are currently enrolled.

- **Ohio Housing Trust Fund:**  
The OHTF is the primary source of state funding for local homeless and affordable housing programs, generating up to \$65 million a year for homeless services, home repair and accessibility programs, and affordable housing development and preservation projects throughout the state. OHTF fee revenues normally fluctuate with the housing market, but collections recently plummeted due to home price inflation and high interest rates, at the same time, Ohio is experiencing a housing affordability crisis. In the short-term, the state should create a backstop mechanism that dedicates general revenue to the OHTF up to the current \$65 million appropriation authority in years when county recorder fee revenues fall short. In the long-term, the state must find ways to diversify and expand funding sources for the OHTF.
- **Eviction Prevention for Families:**  
Evictions inflict long-term damage on families, who often lose their possessions, miss work, switch schools, and crowd in with other struggling families or resort to emergency shelters. Eviction filings make it extremely difficult for families to find housing in the future. Despite these dire consequences, tenants facing eviction can rarely afford legal representation, and eviction diversion resources are scarce. The state should fund access to legal counsel in eviction proceedings for families with children, establish procedures to seal eviction records, and provide emergency assistance to renters experiencing temporary economic hardship.

## Challenge

Ohio faces a broad range of housing issues that limit opportunities for families and children to succeed. Approximately 22,000 minors enter Ohio’s homeless system each year – a number that has been increasing in recent years. Children who experience homelessness are at much greater risk for long-term problems related to physical and behavioral health, academic achievement, and economic success.

## Opportunity

Fortunately, homelessness is a solvable problem. Since 2020, veteran homelessness has dropped 19% in Ohio, while the overall homeless population has grown by 10%. That’s because the federal HUD-VASH program ensures veterans get access to effective Housing First interventions, like supportive housing and rapid rehousing, and collaborative service coordination among multiple governmental and nonprofit agencies. Applying the same kind of strategic focus that has reduced veterans’ homelessness can move thousands of households off the streets and into stable homes to build a brighter future for struggling families.

## Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendations

- Provide an additional \$1.5 million for ODH's youth homelessness program.
- Invest \$2.5 million to complete the Healthy Beginnings at Home project.
- Safeguard the Ohio Housing Trust Fund with a GRF backstop up to \$65 million.
- Enact eviction protections and assistance for low-income families with children.

This issue brief authored by: Gina Wilt, Advocacy Director, COHHIO  
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## Establish a Community Learning Centers (CLC) Statewide Technical Center

Community Learning Centers (CLC) are not only centers of education; they are the new heart of the community, fostering improved conditions for teaching and learning. They act as venues where teachers, families, community members, and service providers collaborate in coordinated, intentional, and results-oriented partnerships. These schools become vital to their communities by offering services that effectively address the needs of students, families, and neighbors while promoting stable, healthy neighborhoods. This is not just another program; it signifies a significant shift in how we view schools, extending beyond simply providing student support and services.

Community Learning Centers positively impact the lives of children, families, educators, and their communities daily. By going beyond the traditional boundaries of school and collaborating with local stakeholders, community schools offer practical solutions to the unique challenges faced by the students and families they serve, representing a significant advancement in fulfilling the promise of public education.

In 2000, Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) surveyed various communities to identify the types of schools needed in each neighborhood. CPS developed a plan to create schools tailored to each area's specific needs, referring to them as community learning centers. The Cincinnati model has been replicated in several other cities throughout Ohio and other states.

New Lexington Public Schools has transformed their CLC into a K-12 rural career development model. Located in rural southeastern Ohio, New Lexington Schools serves 1,741 students. According to the federal designation, 100% of the student population is economically disadvantaged. New Lexington Schools and the Village of New Lexington have come together to enhance various aspects of the town, benefiting the campus that houses the Workforce Development Building. This model provides services that support both staff and the community, including a childcare center, health services, warming centers, and community feeding programs (such as weekend and summer food initiatives), along with a robust business council.

Students don't live their lives in isolation; a variety of experiences influence them. The legislature must guarantee full funding for the Fair School Funding base costs and allocate resources for wellness programs for both students and teachers.

## Policy

In 2013, the General Assembly authorized the use of Disadvantaged Pupil Aid funds for activities related to Community Learning Centers. This enables districts to employ Community Resources Coordinators, who are crucial in coordinating services within a school building.

In 2015, after three years of a bipartisan group of legislators reviewing different CLC models, Ohio committed to expanding Community Learning Centers (CLC) statewide, as enshrined in Ohio Revised Code 3302.16, which creates local building teams and actively seeks input from students, teachers, and parents. The Fair School Funding Formula also includes components of the CLCs. This established the foundation for Governor DeWine's Student Wellness and Success Fund.

The State's expansion of school-based health centers and establishment of other CLCs is a positive development; however, to ensure that children's other needs are addressed, the state should create a Technical Center to assist those coordinating local programs. The Community Learning Center Institute of Cincinnati applied for a Federal grant to create a State-Wide Technical Center, but it fell one point short of eligibility, receiving 105 points. The federal grant identified several school districts that wanted to establish CLCs in Appalachia. State funding of a Technical Center could provide training and quality assurance, ensuring effective use of state dollars.

## Challenge

Advocating for a new Technical Center may prove challenging due to concerns about funding sources and policymakers who fail to recognize the need for such a center. The funding challenge can be addressed. Policymakers should look to local school districts in Appalachia, which have supported a statewide Technical Center. The legislature should not allow rigid national trends to obstruct funding for a sound policy decision that aligns with the Governor's priorities.

## Opportunities

Ohio's effort to expand community learning centers is like a thousand-piece puzzle. Some of the pieces are together, and all the components are there, but more direct guidance, oversight, and assistance are needed to help put all the details together faster. The Community Learning Center Institute will serve as that state hub and broaden our work regionally by working with steering committee members. Our plan will focus on rural schools and include work with suburban schools.

### Pipeline Services

- Link to high-quality early childhood education programs.
- Deliver high-quality school and after-school programs and strategies.
- Ensure activities that support postsecondary and workforce readiness, which may include job training, internship opportunities, and career counseling.

- Engage community-based support for students who have attended schools in the pipeline's service area or for those who are community members. This support will enhance their ongoing connection to the community and contribute to their success in postsecondary education and the workforce.
- Provide health, nutrition, and mental health services and support.

## Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendations

- Ohio policymakers should support the creation of a statewide Technical Assistance Center for Community Learning Centers. The center, which would cost \$200,000, would boost student academic performance and foster community development.

This issue brief was authored by: Darold Johnson, Director of Legislation, Ohio Federation of Teachers  
Published: March 2025

Sources:

[Section 3302.16 – Ohio Revised Code](#)

[Section 3302.17 - Ohio Revised Code | Ohio Laws](#)

[Section 3302.18 – Ohio Revised Code](#)

New Lexington Schools Workforce Development: <https://www.nlpanthers.org/WorkforceDevelopment.aspx>

New Lexington Schools/AFT Partnership: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JopbloK3liU>

Article on Emergent Welding: [https://www.perrytribune.com/news/article\\_390aecc-56df-11ec-91e5-9f9409696790.html](https://www.perrytribune.com/news/article_390aecc-56df-11ec-91e5-9f9409696790.html)



## Expand Access to High-Quality Childcare

Every child, regardless of race, class, or zip code, deserves to be safe, cared for, and educated. High-quality childcare provides care for Ohio's children and helps prepare them for success in school and their future. Childcare also keeps our economy running and helps parents stay in the workforce.

### Policy

Ohio's publicly funded childcare (PFCC) program helps make childcare affordable for working parents. PFCC is available to children of working parents at or below 145 percent of the federal poverty level (a family of three making \$38,642.50 a year or less) or 150 percent of the federal poverty level for children with special needs. Once qualified, families can continue to participate in the program until they surpass 300 percent of the federal poverty level (which is \$79,950 for a family of three). PFCC is administered by the Ohio Department of Children and Youth.

### Challenge

When children receive high-quality early education, they are more likely to be ready for kindergarten. Only 35% of Ohio kids start kindergarten ready to learn (Ohio Department of Education, 2024).

But high-quality childcare is unaffordable for many Ohio families. For the average annual cost of one infant's childcare (\$10,417 according to the National Database of Childcare Prices) to be affordable (as defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), a family of three with two parents and one infant would need an annual income of \$148,814. **Put another way, two parents would have to each make \$35.77 per hour working full time to make childcare affordable at the average rate, for just one infant.**

Many parents can't afford high-quality care. If a parent, working full time, has one infant and one toddler at an average cost childcare center, then \$11.86 of every hour they work would go to childcare costs. For comparison, the minimum wage in Ohio is \$10.70 per hour. The parent in this family of three makes too much to qualify for PFCC, but too little to afford high-quality childcare and other basics.

Today, working parents have few options. From 2017 to 2023, the number of childcare workers in Ohio dropped by 31.94% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Annie E Casey's Kids Count Data Center found that Between 2019 and 2023, the number of children benefiting from publicly funded childcare in Ohio dropped by 32,000, from 172,585 children to 140,585. The childcare system is built on low-paid labor primarily performed by women and disproportionately Black women. Women make up 95% of the

childcare workforce and are paid a median wage of just \$13.44 an hour in Ohio (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). Razor thin margins have kept wages low and turnover high and this reduces the number of childcare slots available. The shortage of workers means childcare providers serve fewer families and have longer waitlists. Early childhood educators perform an essential role of loving, caring for, and teaching our children and helping parents stay in the workforce; their wages should reflect this essential work.

Fewer childcare options have forced Ohio parents to work fewer hours or leave the workforce entirely. A 2024 Groundwork Ohio poll found that more than 6 in 10 parents in Ohio who are not working full time would do so if they had affordable childcare.

## Opportunity

We can fix the childcare system and make Ohio the best state to raise a family. Childcare has proven to be a critical support for our workforce, and it increases a child's likelihood to be ready to learn when they start kindergarten. Kindergarten readiness predicts academic and life success. With continued commitment to and investment in high-quality childcare, Ohio can ensure that children are positioned for success early. We know that high-quality childcare in Ohio works for families and children and is good for our state's economy.

## Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendations

- Stabilize the childcare sector: Protect all current levels of state and federal funding for PFCC and increase state investment in the program. Fund federally required changes, including capping parent copays at 7% of their income and reimbursing providers based on enrollment rather than attendance, through the FY26-27 budget.
- Help more parents afford childcare and participate in the workforce: Expand initial eligibility for publicly funded childcare from 145 percent FPL to 300 percent FPL to help parents afford childcare and ensure more children at-risk for not being ready for kindergarten have access to high-quality care. At 300 percent FPL, Ohioans at the median household income would qualify for assistance.
- Make childcare free for childcare workers. Ohio should waive income requirements for childcare workers to participate in PFCC. This would stabilize the sector and each parent receiving assistance would also open additional childcare spots for other children.
- Increase provider reimbursement rates to the 75th percentile, the federal Administration of Children & Families' "benchmark for equal access."

This issue brief authored by Ali Smith, Operation Specialist, Policy Matters Ohio.

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## Fulfilling Ohio's Commitment to Public School Students

In March 1997, the Ohio Supreme Court ruled in *DeRolph v. State* (1997) that Ohio did not, "...provide for a thorough and efficient system of common schools..." as required by the Ohio Constitution. The Court ordered, "...a complete systematic overhaul..." to remedy the state's unconstitutional funding system. The Ohio General Assembly responded with several changes, but the Court ruled in May 2000 that further work was needed, and it gave the General Assembly an additional year to address deficiencies.

The "complete systematic overhaul" ordered in *DeRolph I* and *DeRolph II* was supposed to include but was not limited to: 1) determining a base level of per-pupil funding predicated on the resources required and outcomes expected of a thorough and efficient system; 2) adequate funding for education in every school district; 3) reduction in reliance on property taxes; 4) elimination of forced borrowing to meet ordinary school district expenses; 5) adequate funding for school facilities; 6) elimination of unfunded mandates; 7) elimination of phantom revenue; 8) provisions for a statewide school facilities assessment; and 9) provisions for strict statewide academic standards, including input and output standards.

Two subsequent Ohio Supreme Court decisions upheld the *DeRolph I* and *DeRolph II* decisions and found that the state's school funding system remained unconstitutional. On May 19, 2003, the Court released the case from its jurisdiction, essentially ending further litigation, but it reiterated its earlier findings when it directed the General Assembly, "...to enact a school-financing scheme that is thorough and efficient, as explained in *DeRolph I*, *DeRolph II*, and the accompanying concurrences."

For decades, Ohio lawmakers failed to agree upon and implement a school funding system that met the needs of all of Ohio's students and the requirements of those court decisions. That changed in 2021, when the 134th Ohio General Assembly adopted the Fair School Funding Plan in the biennial budget bill (HB 110). The Fair School Funding Plan provides a predictable student-centered formula that is based upon how much it actually costs to educate a child (known as the input data) and how much a local community can afford to contribute toward these costs.

This groundbreaking plan – created with input from policy makers, finance experts, educators, and community members – was intended to be phased in and fully funded over six years. However, when lawmakers adopted it in HB 110, they only agreed to fund it through the end of the fiscal year (FY) 22-23 biennium (June 30, 2023). Furthermore, the input data used in the FY 22-23 biennium was from FY18 when the most current data would have been from FY 20 (for the FY 22 school year) and FY 21 (for FY

23). In the subsequent budget for FY 24 and FY 25 (HB 33), the 135th Ohio General Assembly updated the base cost inputs to FY 22 (for both FY 24 and FY 25) and continued years three and four of the phase in of the plan.

The fight for full funding continues. To maintain balance between the adequacy side of the funding formula and the state and local share calculation, the input data for the base cost should be updated in conjunction with the property valuation and income data used to determine the state and local share of funding in each school district. However, the property valuation and income data has been updated by the legislature in each of the 4 years of the Fair School Funding plan while the input data has only been updated once.

## Policy

It is imperative that Ohio fully implements the Fair School Funding Plan and makes the necessary modifications to update the formula components. The Plan's formula is based on student need and provides enough state resources to reduce the reliance on local property taxes. Further, the funding plan allows school districts to plan appropriately and invest resources where they're needed to help students succeed. Implementation of the Fair School Funding Plan puts Ohio on the path toward a constitutional funding system as ordered by the DeRolph decisions.

## Challenge

There are many challenges to achieving full implementation of the Fair School Funding Plan.

During the 135th General Assembly, the legislature passed universal eligibility for school vouchers under the EdChoice program. This provides private school tuition funded by taxpayer dollars. In the current school year, the cost of students attending private school through one of Ohio's five voucher programs is nearly one billion dollars. Most of the new participating students have never attended public school. The expansion of these programs creates greater strain on the state budget and puts full implementation of the Fair School Funding Plan at risk. Nearly 90% of Ohio's students attend public school and the state has a constitutional obligation to fund its public schools adequately and equitably. The rising cost of privatization, and political pressure to further expand voucher programs (to homeschooling and unaccountable non-chartered private schools) present headwinds for full implementation of the Fair School Funding Plan.

In addition, Ohio has seen a steady reduction in the state's income tax rates since 2005. There have also been proposals introduced in previous general assemblies to phase out the state income tax which is a primary source of revenue for the state budget. Additionally, the Ohio General Assembly has steadily flattened the state's income tax brackets. Starting with nine (9) rate brackets, over the last 20 years the Ohio General Assembly has lowered and consolidated brackets down to two (2) beginning in 2024.

Complicating funding for the Fair School Funding Plan is impending local property tax reform anticipated to be taken up by the 136th Ohio General Assembly. While there were many competing reform proposals in the last General Assembly, it is likely that a proposal to raise the 20-mill floor for public school districts could be passed. Such a proposal could exacerbate funding inequities between districts, increased property tax rates for residents, and higher failure rates for more frequent levies to meet the new millage floor.

Ultimately, any structural changes to the state income or local property taxes that do not guarantee local school districts are held harmless or that are in alignment with the Fair School Funding Plan could potentially shift the responsibility of funding public schools to local school districts.

An additional challenge to full implementation come from the categorical cost studies that were commissioned to identify the resources required for students with special needs, English learners, and students in poverty. While we are still awaiting the results of the students in poverty cost study, the other two studies revealed significant funding gaps, highlighting the need for increased investments to meet these students' unique needs. However, full implementation of the plan has been complicated by the substantial financial commitment required to align state funding with these cost studies, on top of fully updating and phasing in the Fair School Funding Plan.

Lastly, the lack of political will to allocate sufficient resources for the Fair School Funding Plan, competing budget priorities such as increasing vouchers or cutting taxes, and the complexity of distributing funds equitably across diverse districts have all hindered progress, leaving many vulnerable students without the support they need to succeed. Legislative leaders have already expressed reservations about the sustainability of the Fair School Funding Plan, describing the expectation of fully implementing the plan as a “fantasy” and the current system of public-school funding as “unsustainable.”

## Opportunity

Ohio lawmakers have a tremendous opportunity to build upon the foundation of the Fair School Funding Plan enacted over the last two general assemblies by ensuring it is fully funded and updated into the future. This will finally achieve our state’s constitutional promise to give all children, regardless of their race, zip code, or family income, the resources needed to thrive and succeed.

## Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendations

Ohio must:

- Fulfill the promise of the Fair School Funding Plan by ensuring that the last two years of the six-year phase-in are achieved.
- Update the formula components with current data (i.e., property valuations, resident income, teacher salaries, etc.) simultaneously.
- Begin to implement the recommendations of the comprehensive state studies to improve funding for special education, students in poverty and English learners to ensure all students receive the world-class education they deserve, regardless of background or address.

This issue brief was authored by: Scott DiMauro, President, Ohio Education Association, and Melissa Clark, Government Relations, Ohio Education Association  
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## Funding for local Libraries

Libraries offer access to books, digital resources, and research materials, ensuring that knowledge is available to all, regardless of income. They promote early childhood literacy, assist students with homework, and provide adult education and career development programs. Many libraries offer free internet access and technology training for those without digital resources. Furthermore, libraries host cultural events, book clubs, and educational workshops that strengthen community connections and encourage civic engagement.

The data highlights the crucial role libraries play within the community. According to the State Library Board, more than seven million residents in Ohio possess library cards, including 1.5 million children and nearly 6 million adults. Additionally, library computers are utilized over six million times annually.

Engaging with books, participating in community events, and accessing resources for personal growth enhance mental health and creativity. Community libraries are more than just book repositories—they are vital centers for education and social progress.

### Policy

Over the past two years, libraries have received 1.70 percent of the General Revenue Fund. State revenue supports local libraries and the State Library Board. State funding and strategic goals of the Library Board assist local libraries in enhancing their outreach and services. The State Library aims to provide local libraries and the public with access to books, a wide range of media, and technical support, all to reduce costs and improve the public's experience.

### Challenges

A budget cut to the share of General Revenue Funds for libraries will hinder their ability to expand their programs.

## Opportunity

Increasing state funding for public libraries in Ohio can yield numerous benefits that enhance education, community engagement, economic development, and overall quality of life. Here are several reasons why increasing funding is a sound investment:

- **Enhanced Educational Opportunities:**  
Public libraries are essential for everyone. They provide access to books, digital resources, and literacy programs that aid learning. More funding allows libraries to expand their services, ensuring students and job seekers have the necessary resources to succeed.
- **Bridging the Digital Divide:**  
In today's digital age, access to computers, high-speed internet, and digital literacy is essential. Many Ohioans in rural or underserved areas rely on libraries for these services. Increased funding can help libraries enhance technology, provide digital training, and offer free access to online educational resources.
- **Community and Economic Development:**  
Libraries serve as hubs for residents to gather, hosting public meetings, workshops, and cultural events. They promote community cohesion and civic engagement while supporting local economic growth by providing resources such as market research tools, business planning assistance, and networking opportunities for small business owners and entrepreneurs.
- **Support for Vulnerable Populations:**  
Libraries serve as refuge spaces for seniors and low-income families who lack access to essential services. Increased state funding can develop programs like language courses, job workshops, and social service referrals to address these communities' needs.

## Support Child Well-Being: Budget recommendations

- Increase funding for libraries received from the General Revenue Fund from 1.7 to 1.9 % of the General Revenue Fund.

This issue brief was authored by: Darold Johnson, Director of Legislation, Ohio Federation of Teachers  
Published: March 2025

Sources:

<https://library.ohio.gov/>

<https://www.ghpl.org/2020/10/07/live-online-homework-help/>

<https://www.worthingtonlibraries.org/calendar/20250204/genealogy-databases-library>

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# Hunger-Free Schools Ohio - Healthy School Meals for All

Providing healthy school meals at no cost for every student in Ohio is a critical investment in improving the health and well-being of Ohio's students, ending child hunger in schools, and strengthening our education and health system. Research shows that school meals improve school attendance, academic achievement, standardized test scores, and children's overall cognitive function. Healthy school meals are also shown to contribute to greater food security and improved mental and behavioral health outcomes, an important priority of the DeWine administration. **Universal school meals remove the stigma associated with free meal programs, ensuring that no student is singled out for receiving assistance.**

## Policy

There has never been a more important time to invest in school meals for all children. Ohio must act in this budget to avoid the child hunger cliff. Six states have passed legislation to continue providing school meals at no cost to all children (Maine, California, Vermont, Nevada, Massachusetts, and Colorado), and Pennsylvania will be providing breakfast for all students at no cost.

**These states have demonstrated that universal school meal programs not only improve student well-being but also generate long-term savings for taxpayers by streamlining administration and reducing per-meal costs. Research shows that every dollar invested in these programs generates more than two dollars in returns through improved health outcomes and academic performance.**

Ohio can address child hunger by providing our children with meals during the school day so they can thrive in school. We can make the following policy decisions in Ohio's operating budget to ensure all children have access to healthy school meals:

- Provide state funding to cover the portion of school meal costs not paid by the federal government, ensuring schools are fully reimbursed at the "free rate" for all meals served.
- Provide additional resources and education for ODE to help encourage and assist school districts eligible for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) in pursuing this option to more effectively maximize federal funding and relieve local fiscal pressures impacting the program.
- In the absence of budget commitments toward school meals, the administration should prioritize anti-lunch shaming policies to ensure no student is denied access to a hot meal at school. **Ohio is among the states lacking an anti-lunch shaming policy, leading to distressing situations where students are denied meals due to outstanding meal debt.**

## Challenge

The federal school meal programs have played a central role in reducing hardship during the pandemic. Last school year, USDA provided waivers to schools, allowing them to serve meals at no cost to all students. Those meals were a lifeline for struggling families, but the waivers expired, leaving schools and students in Ohio without access to free school meals.

**Many families, particularly those just above the eligibility threshold for free or reduced-price meals, continue to struggle. Nearly 37% of food-insecure families in Ohio do not qualify for nutrition assistance, leaving them in a precarious financial position. Universal school meals would eliminate this gap and provide relief to working families, saving them between \$1,000 and \$1,200 per child annually.**

All school districts in our state face significant challenges in supporting students and addressing non-instructional needs of children while also being tasked to nourish our children each school day. We have heard from school districts that the financial and administrative burden of shifting back to a tiered payment system for school meals has been challenging, and they worry that more students are going hungry.

Further, school districts across the state are reporting record levels of school meal debt, an indicator that families are struggling to make ends meet. This is troubling because some of our school districts have policies in place that require meal providers to take away a student's hot meal when they accrue a certain amount of school lunch debt. Today, in some districts in Ohio, a kindergartener may go through the lunch line ready to eat their hot school meal, only to have it taken away and instead handed a paper-bag sandwich because their family cannot afford the school meals.

## Opportunity

America's infrastructure does not just include roads and bridges; it also includes our food distribution system and how nutritious food gets to all those who need it. Free school meals for all improve our human infrastructure by ensuring that children receive the nutritious meals they need to thrive while supporting jobs and financial viability for school nutrition departments.

**Ohio already funds essential services like transportation, textbooks, and technology for all students. Meals should be treated the same.**

We have an opportunity to prioritize Ohio’s children and families and make meals accessible to every child—regardless of their ability to pay. This is something that parents overwhelmingly want for their children. In fact, in a survey of over 1,300 parents and caregivers with students in K-12 schools in Ohio, **87% agreed that school meals should be provided to all students regardless of their ability to pay. Additionally, 67% of Ohio voters support providing free meals for all public-school students, demonstrating widespread bipartisan backing for this initiative.**

## Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendations

- Provide state funding to cover the portion of school meal costs not paid by the federal government, ensuring schools are fully reimbursed at the "free rate" for all meals served.
- Provide additional resources and education for school districts to maximize federal funds for school meals by encouraging school districts eligible for CEP to pursue this option leveraging federal funding to relieve local fiscal pressures.
- The administration must, at the very least, prioritize anti-lunch shaming policies to ensure no student is denied a hot meal at school.

This issue brief was authored by: Cyndy Rees, Executive Director, Council for a Strong Ohio.  
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## Maximizing Medicaid for a Stronger & Healthier Ohio

Access to affordable health insurance has had a powerful influence on the health of Ohio's children. Research shows that because of Medicaid coverage, children have less severe illnesses, fewer hospitalizations, fewer emergency department visits, and more preventive care than they would have had they not been insured.<sup>1</sup> Medicaid coverage for kids and pregnant women is tied to greater overall economic security, including higher college enrollment rates and wages.<sup>2</sup>

### Challenge

**Children in Ohio aren't getting the care they need.** Ohio can and should be doing a better job of providing care to families and children — particularly those who are covered by and/or eligible for Medicaid.

- **4.9% of Ohio's children do not have health insurance.**<sup>3</sup> Similarly, children under 138% of the Federal Poverty Rate (FPL) have an uninsured rate of 6.5% - meaning that expanded access to Medicaid could make a big impact.
- More than **1.3 million children** (ages 0-21) in our state are served by Medicaid<sup>4</sup> - or **54.5% of Children** in the state according to CDF-Ohio's Kids Count Data Profiles.<sup>5</sup>
- **Ohio is 29th in the Nation in Uninsured Children** – meaning that many Ohio kids aren't getting what they need to live healthy lives.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hakim, R. B., Boben, P. J., & Bonney, J. B. (2000). Medicaid and the Health of Children. *Health care financing review*, 22(1), 133–140. Can be found at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4194697/#:~:text=Medicaid%20has%20had%20a%20powerful,had%20they%20not%20been%20insured.>

<sup>2</sup> Jeopardizing a Sound Investment: Why Short-Term Cuts to Medicaid Coverage During Pregnancy and Childhood Could Result in Long-Term Harm – [the Common Wealth Fund](https://www.commonwealthfund.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Park_Medicaid_short_term_cuts_long-term-effects_ib_v2.pdf). Can be found here: [https://www.commonwealthfund.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Park\\_Medicaid\\_short\\_term\\_cuts\\_long-term-effects\\_ib\\_v2.pdf](https://www.commonwealthfund.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Park_Medicaid_short_term_cuts_long-term-effects_ib_v2.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> CDF Ohio Kids Count Data Profiles (2024). Can be found here: <https://www.childrensdefense.org/cdf-in-the-states/ohio/cdf-oh-kids-count/cdf-oh-kids-count-data-profiles/>

<sup>4</sup> The Ohio Department of Medicaid, Testimony to Finance Committee (Feb 5<sup>th</sup>, 2025): [https://ohiohouse.gov/committees/finance/meetings/cmte\\_h\\_finance\\_1\\_2025-02-05-1030\\_16](https://ohiohouse.gov/committees/finance/meetings/cmte_h_finance_1_2025-02-05-1030_16)

<sup>5</sup> KFF.org. State Indicators, Children 0-18 Health insurance access. Can be found: <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/children-0-18/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

<sup>6</sup> Georgetown: Kids Health Care Report Card (2023). Can be found here: <https://kidshealthcarereport.ccf.georgetown.edu/states/ohio/>

- In Ohio, **29.5% of Children** in small towns and rural areas are covered by Medicaid or CHIP (Children’s Health Insurance Program).<sup>7</sup>

## Supporting Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendations

- **Medicaid is a lifesaving program for thousands of Ohio kids.** However, Ohio kids have had their access to Medicaid threatened by Federal action. During the Medicaid Unwinding, Ohio was one of nine states with the highest rate of children removed from Medicaid coverage.<sup>8</sup> To counteract this potential harm, the state must put forward a child-centered budget.
- **The state must implement a waiver for continuous coverage of kids 0-3 and consider an expansion up to age 6.** Allowing children with Medicaid to maintain their coverage regardless of household income fluctuations will give children consistent access to the well-child visits, vaccinations, and specialty care they need to start school ready to learn, while helping low-income parents stay focused on getting their kids to the doctor without worrying about whether visits will be covered from one month to the next.
- **Strengthen Medicaid/CHIP to allow coverage for children in families up to 300% FPL.** Expansion up to 300% FPL (or \$79,950.00 for a family of 3) can ensure that all children in Ohio have access to affordable, quality health care during all stages of development, which is essential to their future health and success. Children in families where one or more parents work a low-wage hourly job would benefit significantly – in 2023, only 23.9% of workers under 200% FPL were able to access employer sponsored health insurance.<sup>9</sup>
- **Increase utilization of Ohio’s Evidence-based Home Visiting Programs (Help Me Grow).** Home visiting programs are one proven approach to mitigating infant mortality. For every \$1 invested in home visiting programs, the state return on investment is up to \$6.<sup>10</sup> Ohio increased its investment to \$80 million over the biennium in evidence-based home visiting programs in the FY 22-23 budget. Ohio should continue to fully fund the Help Me Grow program at current levels.

<sup>7</sup> Georgetown (2025) Medicaid's Role in Small Towns and Rural Areas. Can be found at:

<https://ccf.georgetown.edu/2025/01/15/medicaids-role-in-small-towns-and-rural-areas/#heading-7>

<sup>8</sup> Secretary Becerras Letter to Ohio Governor (2024). Can be found at: <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sec-becerras-letter-to-oh-governor.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> KFF.org. Employer sponsored Health Insurance: Policy 101. Can be found: <https://www.kff.org/health-policy-101-employer-sponsored-health-insurance/?entry=table-of-contents-who-is-covered-by-employer-sponsored-health-insurance>

<sup>10</sup>As described in *Investing in Ohio’s Children and Families*, Ohio Budget Fact Sheet:

[https://archives.obm.ohio.gov/Files/Budget\\_and\\_Planning/Operating\\_Budget/Fiscal\\_Years\\_2020-2021/Enacted/Investing\\_in\\_Children\\_and\\_Families.pdf?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://archives.obm.ohio.gov/Files/Budget_and_Planning/Operating_Budget/Fiscal_Years_2020-2021/Enacted/Investing_in_Children_and_Families.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

- **Fully Fund House Bill 7 (Up to \$34 million over FY26-27).**<sup>11</sup> House Bill 7, as passed in the 135<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, is a big step forward for healthier Ohio kids. Fully funding this new statute provides additional funding for the Department of Children and Youth (DCY), the Ohio Department of Health (ODH), and the Ohio Department of Medicaid (ODM) to cover the costs of new program requirements and interagency agreements such as:
  - Comprehensive screening
  - Coordination of home visiting services
  - Increasing access to WIC and more.
  - Supporting the Healthy Beginnings at Home program
- **Standing Firm Against Federal Cuts.** Federal lawmakers are considering cuts to key policies that keep Ohio children and families healthy. Federal Medicaid cuts could have severely impact children –22% of Federal Medicaid funds in 2023 were spent on children.<sup>12</sup> In 2023, more than half of all federal spending on children (57%) went toward programs like Medicaid, CHIP, and SNAP —which are all currently facing Federal cuts.<sup>13</sup> Ohio lawmakers must send a clear message that these actions by Congress would hurt Ohioans.

This issue brief authored by Kathryn Poe, Budget & Health Researcher, Policy Matters Ohio.  
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<sup>11</sup> This cost estimate is from the original Fiscal Analysis of the Bill as Introduced. Because of this, the number is a high estimate compared to the final version of the bill as passed by the legislature.

<sup>12</sup> The Urban Institute: How would children fare under the proposed cuts? (2025): <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/how-would-children-fare-under-proposed-cuts-federal-spending>

<sup>13</sup> The Urban Institute (2024). Kids Share of Federal Spending: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/kids-share-2024>



## Reducing Food Hardships for Ohio Families

Factors including rising prices for food, housing, childcare, utilities, transportation, and other basic household needs, as well as reductions in or elimination of federal programs that helped families make ends meet, continue to drive households with children to seek help from the Ohio Association of Foodbanks statewide food pantry network in historic numbers and with growing frequency. In state fiscal year 2024, Ohio's food pantries provided take-home groceries to help meet nutritional needs for 4.8 million children, which made up 30.4% of the 15.9 million people served. Need has continued to climb in the years following the pandemic; Ohio foodbanks served 73% more children in SFY 2024 than they did in SFY 2022, when they served 2.8 million children.<sup>14</sup>

Ohio's leaders seeking to help reduce economic hardship for families with children and promote quality outcomes for Ohio's kids should look to Ohio's childcare sector. Working families don't only rely on quality childcare year-round – including when their school-aged students are out of school for the summer – to keep their kids cared for, safe, engaged, and active. They also count on child care facilities, summer sites, and afterschool programs for healthy meals and snacks for their kids. However, federal reimbursements for those meals are not keeping up with the costs involved in procuring and preparing nutritious, delicious meals. At Children's Hunger Alliance (CHA), demand is similarly higher than ever with a weekend meal wait list of 85 schools, and a lack of sufficient staffing to help in-home and child care center providers access to nutritious food for the kids in their care.

Children who do not have nutritious or sufficient food struggle to learn, with potentially long-lasting physical and psychological issues that will also affect their ability to earn a living. To be the best state to raise a family, Ohio must give children all the tools they need to thrive and view food security as an essential ingredient to family stability and overall health.

### Policy

- **Streamlining access to federal nutrition programs:** Additional direct certification between programs would ensure that families and children are enrolled in the programs for which they are eligible. The Ohio General Assembly could direct agencies, like the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS), the Ohio Department of Medicaid (ODM), and the Ohio Department of Health (ODH) to share data and work together to ensure eligible families are directly enrolled in programs like SNAP, Medicaid, and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) based on their eligibility for other program(s). This reduces the burden on families and county

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<sup>14</sup> Duplicated service statistics

caseworkers during the application and recertification processes, reducing caseload churn and freeing up resources to focus on other priorities for improving family stability. Additionally, thousands of Ohioans have had millions of federally-funded SNAP benefits stolen by organized criminals who have targeted Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards for theft. EBT cards must be modernized (upgraded to chip-enabled or tap-to-pay technology) to prevent more vulnerable Ohio families from being victimized.

- **Investments in the emergency food network:** Far too many hardworking families with children simply are unable to afford enough food after they have paid for housing, utilities, transportation, health care, medicine, childcare, and basic household necessities. Others need a safety net to turn to when they experience an unexpected crisis, from a car repair to lost wages due to unpaid sick days. Fortunately, [the State of Ohio can continue to support Ohio foodbanks](#) through the existing Ohio Food Program and Agricultural Clearance Program, which has supported Ohio farmers and families for three decades.
- **Strengthening school meals and meals at childcare centers:** Every student in Ohio should be able to count on wholesome meals as part of their school day. Every child in Ohio should be able to count on wholesome meals at daycare, afterschool, and summer programs. [Making meals for all students](#) part of the school day reduces stigma and reduces the burden on families and schools to submit applications and determine eligibility. Enhancing support for meals available through childcare providers promotes health and educational attainment year-round. [Visit the Children's Hunger Alliance website](#) to learn more.
- **Modernization of WIC:** Ohio must modernize its implementation of the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Ohio's program needs to be transitioned to an online program, where benefits are loaded onto an EBT card like the SNAP program and where individuals can complete a full application online. Ohio is one of just 9 states still requiring in-person office visits to load WIC benefits, which led to a reduction in Ohio's WIC caseload during the pandemic at a time when more mothers, infants, and children needed support.
- **Family focused state tax credits:** It costs a lot to raise a family; Ohio needs to support families as it strives to attract and retain workers. A thriving families tax credit would help nearly 986,000 Ohio families and 1.8 million children under 18 and provide eligible families with an average tax refund of roughly \$1,000 a year. This tax credit would directly improve food security, as demonstrated by the significant reductions in food insufficiency when the federal expanded Child Tax Credit was available through advance monthly payments in 2021.

## Challenge

Ohio's families have sought help from Ohio's hunger relief network more over the past two years than at any time in the past three decades. Persistently high costs for food, combined with a lack of affordable housing, rising utility costs, increased transportation expenses, climbing childcare costs, and more, are contributing to [rising rates of child and overall food insecurity](#). Lack of access to adequate, nourishing food not only causes immediate hardship and suffering, but negatively impacts educational attainment, child health and wellbeing, and future economic and health outcomes as children grow.

## Opportunity

We know what policy changes would alleviate hunger and support financial stability for families. The evidence is also clear that these hunger-fighting policies would lead to better learning and health outcomes for young Ohioans. The whole state benefits when all Ohio children and families are given the tools to thrive. The 136th General Assembly and the DeWine Administration have the opportunity to invest in a hunger-free future for all Ohio children during this biennial budget.

### Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendations

- Invest in Ohio’s emergency hunger relief network so families can turn to their local food pantry when they experience a crisis – support the Ohio Association of Foodbanks state-funded food programs, the Ohio Food Program and Agricultural Clearance Program.
- Invest in efforts led by Children’s Hunger Alliance to get food to children where they are at including family childcare and childcare centers, school, afterschool, weekend, and summer programs – including funds to remove schools from waitlists for weekend meals.
- Streamline access to nutrition programs by directing agencies to adopt cross-enrollment initiatives and to utilize direct certification.
- Protect access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for families by modernizing Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards to deter and prevent theft of grocery benefits.
- Support the modernization of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to improve participation in the program.
- Create a Thriving Families Tax Credit to support Ohio families with affording basic needs including rent, childcare, and groceries.
- Invest in school meals for all to support better learning and life outcomes for the next generation.

This issue brief authored by: Sarah Kuhns, advocacy and engagement manager, Ohio Association of Foodbanks and Scott Neely, senior director of government affairs, Children’s Hunger Alliance

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# Scholarships for Students with Experience in Foster Care

The idea for a scholarship to assist students with experience in foster care is not new. Thirty-one states have a tuition waiver or scholarship program for students with experience in foster care. Last General Assembly, the Ohio House of Representatives passed a bill ([HB 164](#)) to enact a foster care scholarship program. Unfortunately, the bill did not pass in the Ohio Senate. Recently, the bill was reintroduced as [HB 25](#) and [SB 13](#). These bills tell children in foster care that they matter and that the adults in their lives will do their part to help them succeed. Scholarships for students with experience in foster care (SEFC) will increase the number who aspire to pursue higher education and complete college, while also helping them to achieve lifetime financial stability.

## Policy

### Scholarships for Students with Experience in Foster Care

Ohio can enact a “students with experience in foster care” tuition waiver or scholarship. The annual cost of attendance to any institution of higher education (IHE) in Ohio, which is around \$22,000 for public institutions and \$46,000 for private institutions, according to the National Center for Education Statistics is a challenge for students with experience in foster care. A “tuition waiver” law, which waives tuition, fees, and room and board in Ohio would increase opportunities for students with experience in foster care to matriculate and graduate from IHEs. Caidyn Bearfield, a student with experience in foster care at Columbus State Community College says:

“Nearly every fellow former foster youth that I have ever met relates to what I have endured: we were moved around extensively, often as a result of neglect or abuse experienced in a placement, and without much say in the matter. How are they supposed to be involved in the extracurriculars or have a competitive GPA and earn scholarships? Full-ride scholarships would be a life-affirming preventative measure to equip today’s foster youth to defy the statistical trends we have seen for so many decades and break the cycle.”

## Challenge

Ohio trails the nation in outcomes for youth aging out of care. According to national data, at age 21, Ohio youth were less likely to graduate high school or get a GED, obtain employment, be enrolled in school, and more likely to be justice-system involved than their peers across the nation. Ohio is in the bottom 10% of states across each of these measures.

## Opportunity

The research is clear, the main barriers to higher education for youth are financial, preparedness, and aspirations. Students who know they can pay for college are more likely to aspire to attend. Reducing financial barriers increases the likelihood that a student will complete their degree. A recent study in Texas shows that the students who take advantage of this type of state policy are 3.5 times more likely than their peers to graduate with a postsecondary education degree.

## Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendations

- Enact legislation that waives tuition and provides for the full cost of attendance (room, board, books, and fees) to any IHE in Ohio for SEFC, regardless of age or state of residence during foster care.
- Create a cost-sharing model between IHEs and the Ohio Department of Higher Education.
- Ensure that financial aid offices can access state funding directly so that students won't have to navigate complex systems on their own.
- Establish a full-time foster care liaison at the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce to work with public children's services agencies, private child placing agencies, and the Department of Job and Family Services to facilitate services to foster children related to school placement.
- Establish four full-time employees at the Ohio Department of Higher Education to serve as foster care student navigators and assist prospective qualifying students in applying for and enrolling in institutions of higher education and applying for college financial assistance.

This issue brief authored by: Dr. John Stanford, State Director, Children's Defense Fund-Ohio,  
Published: March 2025



# Strengthening Ohio's Behavioral Health Workforce to Help Children Thrive

Ensuring all children in Ohio have a healthy and happy start to life is essential to ensuring the state's future prosperity. Research shows that childhood and adolescence are critical times for mental health because of the rapid brain growth and development during these periods of life. It is also a time when some mental health conditions can begin onsetting, some of which would benefit from mental health treatment. One of the most common ways for children to receive mental health treatment in the state is through Medicaid coverage. The importance of child development, safety, and mental health has been continuously stated as an essential priority of the DeWine administration and the General Assembly.

## Challenge

**Many children in Ohio lack access to the care they need.** At the beginning of 2024, the unwinding of the pandemic-era Medicaid rules resulted in **121,577 children in Ohio losing access to Medicaid**, cutting many of them off from necessary physical and mental healthcare. This lack of insurance is an issue enough on its own, but the lack of a strong behavioral health workforce exacerbates the problem.

Over five million Ohioans live in [mental healthcare professional shortage areas](#) (HPSPAs). This is a problem that has been building for years. In 2021, the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services [reported](#) that **demand for mental health services rose by 353%** between 2013 and 2019, but the **workforce only increased by 174%** during the same time. One of the most significant contributors to the lack of growth in the field is [inadequate salaries](#). The average salary for social workers is only \$50,400, while comparable fields such as teachers and nurses have median salaries of \$76,070 and \$84,430, respectively. This leads to individuals leaving the behavioral health field and makes recruiting new workers difficult. This is especially troubling because **only around 30% of the state's behavioral health treatment needs are being met**. This lack of services will continue unless there is an improvement in accessibility and reimbursement for services.

## Opportunity

These challenges can be tackled by investing more in Ohio’s Medicaid program. Many mental health providers interact regularly with the Medicaid system, but Social Workers specifically are heavily impacted by Medicaid rates and accessibility. Around [70% of Social Workers](#) report that their clients receive Medicaid or live in poverty. Investing in Medicaid would be an investment in the human infrastructure of the state. Doing so would increase the accessibility of mental health providers and attract more workers into the behavioral health field.

## Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendations

- Increase Medicaid reimbursement rates by 3% to improve salaries for mental health providers, making the field more appealing and helping to expand the workforce.
- Expand Medicaid/CHIP eligibility to 300% of the FPL to provide mental healthcare for more children.
- Allow schools to be reimbursed for Medicaid services without IEP to increase the number of students that schools can provide mental health services to.

This issue brief was authored by: Matthew Tippit, LSW, Professional Advocacy Coordinator, National Association of Social Workers – Ohio Chapter

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## Strengthening Public Health in Ohio

Public health is a cornerstone of a thriving community. Investing in prevention, healthcare access, and nutrition ensures a healthier population while reducing long-term healthcare costs. This brief outlines critical policy recommendations to address tobacco use, cardiac arrest survival, and food security, paving the way for a stronger, healthier Ohio.

### Policy

Increased funding and policy changes are needed to support tobacco prevention, heart health initiatives, and equitable nutrition programs in Ohio. These changes align with best practices and evidence-based strategies to reduce smoking rates, improve cardiac arrest survival, and enhance access to healthy food and CPR training in schools. The state should allocate \$20 million annually to the Tobacco Use Prevention Fund to align with CDC recommendations and reduce youth and adult smoking rates. Additionally, \$606,800 should be appropriated annually to ensure all Ohio high school students meet CPR training requirements, improving cardiac arrest survival rates. The Ohio CARES Registry should receive \$500,000 annually through the Department of Public Safety to sustain and expand its impact on bystander CPR rates. To support nutrition initiatives, the Produce Perks program funding should be increased to \$2 million per year, expanding access to fresh, healthy food for low-income Ohioans.

### Challenge

Ohio faces significant public health challenges due to insufficient funding for tobacco prevention, high smoking rates, and limited access to CPR training in schools, despite Ohio's heart disease mortality rate exceeding the national average. The Ohio Cardiac Arrest Registry (CARES) is underfunded and risks ceasing operations by 2025, despite its vital role in improving cardiac arrest survival rates. Nutrition insecurity also remains a concern, as the Produce Perks program lacks sufficient funding to expand its reach.

### Opportunity

By implementing these budget recommendations, Ohio can significantly improve public health outcomes, reduce healthcare costs, and create a healthier future for its residents. Increased investment in tobacco prevention will help lower smoking rates and reduce associated health risks. Expanding CPR training and securing funding for the Ohio CARES Registry will improve cardiac arrest survival rates across the state. Enhancing nutrition programs, such as Produce Perks, will ensure better food access for

vulnerable populations, contributing to long-term health improvements. These strategic investments will create a stronger, healthier Ohio, benefiting individuals and communities alike.

## Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendations

- Increase appropriation to \$20 million in each year of the biennium to the Tobacco Use Prevention Fund to reduce youth and adult smoking rates (Line item #440656).
- Create parity in the tax structure; Other Tobacco Products (OTP) should be taxed at the same rate as traditional cigarettes (25%).
- Appropriate \$606,800/year to GRF 200597 (Program and Project Support) to cover additional cost of training incoming senior class and ensure that all graduating students meet the CPR training curriculum requirement.
- Provide \$500,000 annually through the Department of Public Safety to sustain and expand the Ohio CARES Registry, enhancing bystander CPR rates and improving survival from cardiac arrest.
- Increase funding for the Produce Perks program to \$2 million per year, within the Department of Job and Family Service's TANF Block Grant, expanding access to fresh, healthy food for low-income Ohioans.

This issue brief was authored by: Dustin Holfinger, State Government Relations Director, American Heart Association

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## Support Working Parents with a Child Tax Credit

Our state tax code should operate to support all families by having all pay their fair share. Unfortunately, Ohio's tax system is inverted, asking the lowest earning Ohioans to pay a higher share of their income in taxes while creating handouts for the wealthy. Two decades of broad rate income tax cuts have done little for the typical Ohio family. It is time for Ohio's working families to benefit from a tax code that supports them. We could do this with a state child tax credit.

Since 2005, Ohio has shifted money away from working-class families and toward the wealthy and well-connected through tax cuts and special interest giveaways. As a result, the wealthiest 1% of Ohio households are taking home on average, over \$52,000 every year in tax breaks. Meanwhile, Ohio households making less than \$24,000 are paying more on average in state and local taxes today compared to what they did in 2005. After a generation of income tax cuts, moderate to middle earning Ohio families are now paying less in taxes, but these cuts amount to less than \$100 a month for most families. They also have come at a great cost to the state. Tax changes since 2005, driven by massive income tax cuts that benefit the wealthy, have drained almost \$13 billion a year from Ohio's budget that could be improving the quality of life of kids and families across our state. This is why we are calling on state lawmakers to rewrite the tax code in Ohio to boost opportunity for children and working-class families through a state child tax credit.

### Policy

#### **A State Child Tax Credit for all Kids.**

A state child tax credit would help with the cost of raising children, alleviate stress among working parents, and make Ohio strong in the future by setting our children up for success. Governor DeWine's proposal could be improved to cover all Ohio kids by removing the earnings requirement.

A robust credit should cover all kids under the age of 18 with at least a \$500 refundable credit. For kids under the age of six, their parents would receive a credit of \$1,000 to offset the higher cost of raising younger children. The credit should be fully refundable and have no earned income requirement, ensuring the credit reaches Ohio families with the most need.

According to modeling done by the Institute for Tax and Economic Policy, an estimated 1.5 million children under 18 could benefit from a state thriving families tax credit.

## Ohio Thriving Families Tax Credit

### Ohio Child Tax Credit for All Kids

Maximum annual tax credit per child age 0-5	\$1,000
Maximum annual tax credit per child age 6-17	\$500
Average tax credit per claimant	\$993
Number of children benefitting	1,500,000
Eligibility by income	Less than \$80,000

*Claimants of the Credit who make less than \$60,000 would receive the full value of the credit. The credit slowly phases out as income rises for claimants with income between \$60,000 and \$80,000.*

Source: Policy Matters Ohio, based on modeling from the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, January 2025. • Created with Datawrapper

This more robust policy would:

- Provide at least a partial tax cut to roughly 1.5 million Ohioans and their families.
- All Ohioans making less than \$60,000 would receive the full value of the credit. Ohioans making up to \$80,000 would receive at least some value of the credit.
- Beneficiaries of the tax credit, making an average of \$41,600, would receive an average tax cut of \$993.
- These tax benefits are even greater for Ohioans with low and moderate incomes, who receive 72% of the tax cut's value.
  - Lowest 20% of Ohio Earners:
    - Income Range: Less than \$26,300
    - Average Child Tax Credit: \$1,109
    - Share of the value of the Credit: 36.36%
  - Second 20% of Ohio Earners:
    - Income Range: \$26,300 - \$52,000
    - Average Child Tax Credit: \$1,075
    - Share of value of the Credit: 35.71%

## Challenge

Ohio's tax code is upside-down and asks the most economically vulnerable to shoulder even more stresses by forcing them to dedicate more of their limited income to regressive taxes. Working families are seeing more of this income being taken up in higher living costs from utilities to housing and food. It is time to cut these Ohioans a break. Families facing constant insecurity and stress harms children's ability to learn and grow and limits their long-term opportunities. Compared to their more affluent peers, children who grow up in poverty are more likely to do worse in school, have worse health outcomes and get involved with the criminal legal system as adults.

## Opportunity

These outcomes do not have to be the norm for kids from families who are paid low wages. When families have financial stability and resources to pay for the basics, children get better grades in school, are healthier, and are paid more during their lifetime. As Gov. Mike DeWine recently said, “Supporting Ohio’s families now will help children thrive as adults.” We do that by creating a tax system that supports these families, not burdens them. Governor’s DeWine recent proposal for a child tax credit is a step in the right direction, but we can do better.

We propose including more working families with a child tax credit for all kids. Our tax system must support working families not just from the young stages of their children’s lives, but throughout. Instead, the tax code places a disproportionate burden on these families and exacerbates pressures elsewhere like higher rents and grocery bills. These economic pressures did not create new problems with our tax code for working families, it simply made existing problems worse. This is why Ohio lawmakers must act now. Ohio’s children are Ohio’s future.

## Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendations

- Parents and caregivers work hard, day in and day out, to give children the best possible start in life. Our tax system should support their labor. State lawmakers can rewrite the tax code to boost economic security of children and families across the state by putting more money back in the pockets of families and increasing the economic security of thousands of families across the state. A state child tax credit that includes all kids will help Ohio’s children and families succeed.

This issue brief authored by Bailey Williams, Tax Policy Researcher, Policy Matters Ohio.  
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## Systematic Solutions to the Educator Staffing Crisis

During the 135th General Assembly, education stakeholders and a bi-partisan set of legislators secured several of the policy proposals from the 2022 EVA on Teacher Recruitment & Retention. The state biennial budget for Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025 (HB 33 – 135th GA) contained several major priority recommendations from the EVA, these included: 1) Increasing the teacher minimum salary from \$30,000 to \$35,000; 2) establishing a “Grow Your Own Teacher” program, which provides low-income high school seniors and certain school employees scholarships to complete teacher preparation programs; and 3) eliminated the prohibition against school districts compensating student teachers.

Despite the forward progress in HB 33, according to an Ohio Department of Education and Workforce report,<sup>15</sup> educator staffing shortages persist across the state, and shortages are more severe in specific regions of Ohio, subjects, and grade bands. According to the report, the geographies of most concern are Southeast, Southwest, and Western Ohio, particularly when looking at data related to student-to-teacher ratios. Additionally, the report indicated licensure and attrition trends amongst teaching staff have also contributed to local educator shortages. Notably, the number of courses taught by teachers whose licenses do not match the courses they are teaching has increased statewide. Additionally, the teacher attrition rate (those not returning as a teacher) was elevated over the 2021-2022 school year compared to the previous six years. Over this same period, the number of newly credentialed teachers steadily declined (from 7,706 in 2014 to only 5,000 in 2022), and there are more than 43,000 individuals with active teaching licenses who were NOT employed in a public school. Finally, the staffing crisis is not exclusive only to teachers, many districts have also experienced issues in recruiting and retaining educational support professionals, who are critical to providing a high-quality education for students in Ohio.

These educators include paraprofessionals, educational and classroom aides, secretaries, food service staff, custodial and janitorial staff, and bus drivers. Often these individuals are the first and last people the student sees during their school day. They ensure that students have access to the services they need, are educated in safe, clean and healthy environments, and can get to and from school in a timely and safe manner. However, many of these staff are the lowest paid in a district and often they are tasked with handling critical tasks throughout the school day.

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<sup>15</sup> Ohio's Teacher Workforce, <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Research-Evaluation-and-Advanced-Analytics/Data-Insights/Ohio-s-Teacher-Workforce>

## Policy

Addressing the educator staffing crisis has taken time and continues to require a systematic effort by policy makers at all levels – federal, state, and local – in collaboration with stakeholders in the public education community. It is imperative that educators be included in the process that develops solutions to the staffing crisis. While not all policy recommendations proposed to address this issue impact the state’s next biennium budget, state policy must continue to: 1) ensure all educators are compensated at a level that reflects their value; 2) create supportive educator working conditions necessary for conducive conditions for student learning; 3) develop quality job-embedded support systems; and finally, 4) reflect a fundamental respect for educators and their professional autonomy. Furthermore, the State must adopt policies that are built upon what was secured in HB 33-135<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, by creating a system of financial support for pre-service educators, developing an annual survey of school districts to identify how many staff positions are left unfilled at the district level, and addressing educational support professionals’ recruitment and retention challenges.

## Challenge

There are several distinct challenges that impact educator staffing that persist from the previous drafting of this brief connected to educator compensation, barriers to pre-service entry of qualified applicants, and working conditions. Additionally, there are distinct policy challenges impacting this issue. While some improvements were made in the last General Assembly, the passage of legislation like House Bill 8 (the so-called Parent’s Bill of Rights) and Senate Bill 104 (which contained the trans-bathroom ban) have continued to inject culture war fights into public schools and exacerbate problems with the cultural climate in classrooms that have and will continue to drive educators out of the profession.

Additionally, the ability to secure increased and sustainable public-school funding is in direct competition with the threat of further expansion of private school vouchers. Certain political leaders in the Ohio General Assembly have already declared that public school funding is unsustainable and that the final phase in of the Fair School Funding Plan is a “fantasy.” The lack of sustained and adequate funding for public schools will only serve to stymie the progress made and blunt the ability for school districts to hire and retain the educators needed to provide students with a high-quality education. Furthermore, the lack of political will to implement the Fair School Funding Plan with the three categorical cost studies on how much it takes to educate students with special needs, English learners, and that are economically disadvantaged will hinder the recruitment and retention of educators that specialize in educating students from these categories and/or geographies.

Lastly, policies to de-professionalize education and peel back collective bargaining rights were prevented in the 135th General Assembly. It is entirely possible that new leadership in the legislature will continue a push to de-professionalize public education by lowering pre-service requirements, educator prep-programs, professional learning, and licensure standards. It is also entirely possible that the legislature takes up policies that strip away collective bargaining rights of educators, already proposals have been

introduced to strip away collective bargaining rights for higher education faculty (Senate Bill 1) and to restrict activities for union leaders to advocate for their profession and public education (Senate Bill 8).

## Opportunity

Despite recent attempts by members of the General Assembly to insert culture war policies into the classrooms and propose short-term, band-aid solutions to the educator staffing crisis, there are real opportunities to address the educator recruitment and retention problem in Ohio.

It is widely accepted by policymakers, education leaders (at both the local and state levels), and education stakeholders that Ohio must find a systemic and comprehensive set of policy solutions to address this issue.

Finally, policy recommendations must be developed to focus on the recruitment and retention of educational support professionals. Acute shortages of bus drivers, paraprofessionals, cafeteria workers, school secretaries, and other essential workers have significantly disrupted student learning, strained working conditions, and highlighted the need to invest in our ESPs.

## Support Child Well Being: Budget Recommendations

Ohio must continue to build upon gains made in the 135th General Assembly so that all students have access to high-quality, dedicated educators by creating a comprehensive set of solutions to the educator staffing crisis that includes the following:

- Increase Ohio’s state minimum teacher’s salary from \$35,000 to at least \$50,000.
- Fully update and fund the final phase in of the Fair School Funding Plan and ensure that the formula is updated into the future.
- Extend Public Service Loan Forgiveness programs and expand student loan forgiveness, grants, and scholarships to provide meaningful financial relief for those who commit to service students in our public schools.
- Strengthen educators’ retirement security by supporting a fully funded State Teachers and School Employees Retirement Systems (STRS and SERS, respectively).
- Pass policy that permits direct financial support for pre-service educators similar to those in House Bill 563 from the previous General Assembly.
- Require the state to complete a comprehensive assessment of the alignment of Ohio’s teacher preparation programs with the realities of PK-12 schools.
- Seek feedback from educators on their working conditions and create a system for school leaders to act on that feedback to make necessary changes to policies, practices, and culture in schools.
- Create and maintain an accessible statewide database of education job openings to facilitate the matching of educators seeking employment with available positions and to provide a reliable source of information for the public to monitor trends in education employment in Ohio.
- Continue the expansion of “grow your own” educator recruitment programs and the development of Educator Registered Apprenticeship Programs.
- Develop policies to address the recruitment and retention needs of Ohio’s educational support professionals.

This issue brief was authored by: Scott DiMauro, President, Ohio Education Association, Dan Ramos, Director of Government Relations, Ohio Education Association, and the members and staff responsible for the drafting of the OEA Educator Voice Academy on Teacher Recruitment and Retention

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## Youth Justice and Incarceration

“The evidence leaves no doubt: Incarceration is a failed strategy for rehabilitating youth and protecting the public.”

- Richard Mendel

Youth incarceration is a high-cost policy with a low return on investment. It does not reduce delinquent behavior and often worsens outcomes for youth. Studies show formerly incarcerated youth face high rates of rearrests, convictions, and reincarceration. Long stays in secure detention increase the likelihood of further justice system involvement, and pre-trial detention worsens these outcomes. In 2024, Ohio spent \$222,803 per year to incarcerate one child—money that can be invested more effectively. Incarceration inflicts physical and emotional harm on youth, is rife with racial disparities, restricts pathways to educational and financial stability, and does not ultimately improve public safety. Upstream investment in Ohio’s children will prevent their involvement in the juvenile justice system. In the meantime, Ohio should shift spending away from youth confinement and towards local and community alternatives with robust data collection that treat the root causes that lead to justice involvement.

### Policy

After closing five youth prisons between 2007-2019, Ohio’s Department of Youth Services (DYS) now operates three juvenile correctional facilities (JCFs), along with 11 state-funded, locally administered community corrections facilities (CCFs) and contracts with four alternative placement facilities. In FY24, there was a daily average of 519 youth held in JCFs, 219 in CCFs, 60 in alternative placements, and 282 on parole—not including the youth in additional county-run facilities across Ohio, which are not administered by DYS. DYS’s youth average daily population has steadily declined since RECLAIM was created in the early 1990s, with greater declines as DYS adopted more evidence-based intervention and prevention practices through Targeted and Competitive Reclaim; however, JCFs have recently seen a concerning increase, from an average daily population of 457 in 2019 to 519 in 2024.

### Challenge

The juvenile justice system aims to deal with complex and serious behavioral issues by rehabilitating youth and successfully reintegrating them back into their communities, thereby enhancing public safety. Rehabilitation is undermined when justice systems advertently or inadvertently cause more, different, or longer standing behavioral and mental issues for our youth. Ohio’s incarcerated youth have been

subjected to excessive use of force and the highest rate of sexual victimization in the nation. 73% of youth confined in JCFs require mental health treatment, but confinement often exacerbates mental health issues and is associated with worse overall health outcomes later in life. The overreliance on excessive seclusion is especially harmful. Youth incarceration does not reduce recidivism and can, instead, increase it compared to more humane approaches to rehabilitation. Incarcerated youth, 43% of whom require special education, are up to 50% less likely to graduate high school and more likely to experience a reduction in wages and work, hindering their ability to access stable employment. These collateral consequences disproportionately impact Black youth, who currently make up 76% of Ohio's incarcerated youth despite only being 16% of Ohio's youth population—a culmination of the disparate treatment they receive at each level of the justice system.

## Opportunity

In 2023, a series of articles and associated media attention, spearheaded by US News & World Report, brought attention to serious inadequacies and inequalities within DYS. These revelations culminated in Governor DeWine forming the Ohio Juvenile Justice Working Group (JJWG) to examine the state of juvenile justice and corrections in Ohio. The JJWG was comprised of 11 stakeholders with a variety of different perspectives and four legislative advisors, two from each major political party. In September of 2024, the Governor released the final report of the JJWG which contained two interim recommendations and 24 final recommendations to improve efficacy, efficiency, and safety for youth and staff within the juvenile justice system. The dedicated review of extensive data and robust debates undertaken by this group have provided an excellent opportunity to identify and act on necessary changes to Ohio's juvenile justice system.

Aside from funding specific recommendations set forth by the JJWG, Ohio must address the ineffective use of justice-focused dollars spent on carceral facilities. Youth incarceration has declined nationwide, however funding for youth prisons has not decreased at the same rate, creating an opportunity for Ohio to better invest in children's futures. DYS spends inordinately more on youth prisons than it does on its most effective diversion programs, including Targeted RECLAIM, Competitive RECLAIM, and the Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) initiative.

One straightforward solution across the country has been justice realignment and reinvestment, which reduces unnecessary incarceration and intentionally invests the savings into services and systems that treat the risk factors which negatively impact our youth— getting at the root of the issue by diverting youth away from juvenile court involvement and incarceration. Alternative models of youth justice, focusing on community partnerships, are more cost-effective and better serve justice-involved youth, especially youth of color. Programs like BHJJ and Targeted and Competitive RECLAIM have led to improvements in trauma, substance abuse, school performance, and better post-program success while costing a fraction of what incarceration does.

## Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendations

Ohio's current spending priorities do not effectively serve justice-involved youth. To prevent children's further involvement in juvenile court, Ohio should pursue the following evidence-based recommendations:

- Replace large congregate-care facilities with smaller community-connected facilities that leverage local behavioral health and other resources and partners for youth. This transformation must focus on providing a more rehabilitative, relational, trauma-responsive environment for youth, with a specific emphasis on specialized services for youth based on developmental, physical, or behavioral needs. Given its current challenges, it is crucial that resources and attention be directed toward the Indian River facility for immediate facility and system transformation.
- Focus on upstream investment in programs that particularly reach low-income families and under-resourced communities that commit the most youth to DYS. Mechanisms to increase community safety long-term include adequate healthcare, high-quality education, stable employment and income, safe and affordable housing, and food assistance. Children with these protective conditions are more likely to grow into successful, productive members of society.
- Reduce reliance on youth confinement, which does not increase community safety, and use the savings to expand alternative programs. This strategy includes narrowing the kinds of youth eligible for DYS custody to the most serious safety concerns by raising the minimum age of commitment and reducing lower felony levels and mandatory sentencing schemes. We should expand demonstrably positive efforts within DYS's Targeted and Competitive RECLAIM and BHJJ, as well as adapt and adopt effective models of diversion from across the country. Funding should be flexible to foster partnerships with community members and organizations. Specifically, we ask for \$6 million to be allocated to the community programming line of the budget to support these efforts and further invest in local, evidence-based alternatives to incarceration.
- Fund the creation of a Community Corrections Facility in each of the three counties that commit the highest number of youths to DYS (Cuyahoga, Franklin, and Hamilton). These CCFs will allow youth to receive more appropriate care closer to home, where they can better access family and community resources.
- Alternatives to incarceration should be accompanied by robust data collection, evaluation, and oversight to ensure state dollars are being spent justly and effectively on trauma-informed and healing-centered approaches rather than on the harsh or traumatizing conditions of juvenile confinement.

This issue brief authored by: TaKasha Smith Executive Director, Juvenile Justice Coalition

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# OHIO CHILDREN'S BUDGET

*2026-2027*

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