

## **Priority Issue: Early Care and Education**

Ohio's United Ways place the highest priority on working with systems and partners to ensure that children thrive and arrive at kindergarten ready to learn and that parents/caregivers are supported towards that effort. The first three years of a child's life, when the human brain develops more rapidly than any other subsequent period, are a time of enormous social, emotional, physical, cognitive and language development. Research indicates that nearly 90 percent of brain growth occurs during these early years. The pace and outcomes of this growth depends on whether the child's eagerness to learn is stimulated by her/his environment and comprehensive child development is supported. The research is clear that *quality* home visitation programs and *high quality* early learning environments are effective in preparing at-risk children for success in school, work and life. Investment in quality early care and education programs produces one of the highest rates of return of any human capital investment.

### **Budget history and current needs:**

In the SFY 2010-2011 Budget, Ohio's early care and education system sustained devastating levels of funding cuts, reducing total investment by more than \$300 million dollars, eliminating whole programs and significantly reducing others. The limited funds appropriated were applied to maintaining or increasing the level of quality within child care and home visitation programs, quality that we believe is key to successful programs with meaningful outcomes.

Legislation currently being considered at the federal level has the potential of significantly increasing federal investment in a number of our state programs if Ohio meets the requirements for the funds and provides state funds to match the federal dollars. In order to access federal funds the state is required to do a comprehensive system and needs analysis of its early care and education programs and we strongly support a rigorous and complete system assessment.

### **Ohio's United Ways support:**

- Expanding voluntary evidence-based home visitation programs for at-risk children
- Making reimbursement for eligible home-based services for families and children a priority for the Medicaid system
- Reimbursement for quality-rated child care programs at the federally recommended market rate
- Increased funding for both the child care quality rating system, Step Up to Quality, and the teacher training scholarship program, TEACH
- Subsidized child care for children in families up to 200% of the federal poverty level
- Expanded public preschool
- Increased funding for comprehensive early childhood behavioral health
- Increased access to family supports and parenting education
- Support the development of a Center for Early Childhood Education, which should integrate all early childhood programs under a single state agency that will eliminate duplicative licensing, automate payment systems, and increase efficiency and effectiveness.