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**Family Resource Center**

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TO: Chair Hudson, and House Committee on Higher Education and Workforce Development

FROM: Amy Luhn, Director, Family Resource Center, Campus ECE

I fully support HB 3011, a requested and much needed investment into Oregon's publicly funded Early Childhood Education (ECE) credential and degree programs and the campus ECE centers that support student learning in the field of ECE, and support parenting students with young children.

Over the years, state investments in publicly funded ECE degree programs and campus centers have declined - both in Oregon and across the country. At the time those cuts were occurring, it may have made sense given the low status, low pay for the field of ECE. However, fast forward, we now know that child care, quality ECE, is essential to working and studying families with young children. And the reality is we lack the qualified professionals to staff our current and future centers and programs. This declining investment in a public good has been exacerbated by continued low salaries for educated, well-prepared ECE professionals.

The ECE workforce crisis is very real: we have centers across our state operating below capacity because of the lack of available qualified early educators; Oregon has centers that maintain an average 18 month long wait lists, especially for infant toddler care. At OSU we experience this workforce crisis reality on both the Corvallis and Bend campuses.

The higher education setting has an infrastructure that helps improve on this challenge, both in terms of graduating qualified early care educators, as well as in the delivery of high-quality programs. In partnership with our communities, resources from HB3011 would:

- Increase faculty staffing in degree programs to enable recruitment, advising, teaching, coaching, student support in navigating the degree program, facilitating practicum placements
- Provide operational funding so our campus centers can be financially stable, and ready for expansion.

The current discussion is not about whether children should or should not be in group care because the reality is the vast majority of young children will at some point need to be in group care. Approximately 65% of Oregon's children aged 5 years and younger live in households where all available adults are in the workforce. With economic conditions requiring parents to work outside the home, we need stable and expanded early care and education centers - important capacity in a mixed delivery system.

Quality early learning and care is built on a solid understanding of child development. To optimally support children birth to five in group care, our early care and education professionals must have the knowledge of how children grow and learn and need to understand how to support children's social/emotional, cognitive, and physical development in the context of full-time care. Investments in the higher education infrastructure for early care professionals yield graduates who are prepared and ready to ensure that ECE centers and programs in our communities are loving, engaging, developmentally appropriate, stimulating environments for building our children's brains. Degree

programs and centers also prepare graduates to do the vital work of partnering with parents in the shared endeavor of raising children. Without investment in building an educated and well-prepared ECE workforce, and ensuring a standard of quality, we risk ending up with an underqualified workforce providing suboptimal group care for many of Oregon's infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

Campus centers, really any quality center! are financially challenging to sustain so much so that several campuses have closed their centers. It's imperative that we acknowledge that the current financial business model of high quality ECE is broken. All high quality ECE requires stable operational funding. When degree programs have the needed staffing and centers have stable funding we are able to more fully actualize the critical role higher ed plays in ECE workforce development. Additionally, the various pathways that lead to a potential career in ECE, whether it be an apprenticeship, a CDA credential, or a post-secondary degree prepare people for a variety of professional roles that support ECE and other related careers that orbit around children and families.

The status quo of high skill/low wage work in ECE needs to end. Public funding is needed to allow our ECE centers to be staffed by qualified professionals who are compensated with a career-oriented wage and benefits, which clearly communicates to those considering the field that ECE is living and family wage work.

On a personal note, I was one of those younger ECE professionals who loved teaching and working with preschoolers day in and day out. However, to build the life and financial security I needed (and pay back my school loans), I had to leave the classroom. I'm grateful for the career pathway my education and experience have afforded me and, at the same time, working directly with children and families in quality ECE programs should have been a viable career option, and unfortunately this has not changed since I started my career over 30 years ago.

Investing in higher ed ECE workforce development is worth our time, attention and financing. And, it leverages state ECE investments made thus far.

Thank you for your time, and for your ongoing support of early care and education.