

Chairperson Lieber and Chairperson Sanchez,

I deeply appreciate the opportunity to write to you today in support of House Bill 3008 and thank the committee members for taking the time to read my testimony. My name is Kenzie Kihs and I have spent nearly a decade as an early educator. During my time in the classroom, there were several key elements I craved for and felt were critical to my success and effectiveness in my role. These include the need for collaboration with colleagues, a space for open support, and most importantly, reflective supervision to help assess and grow in my teaching practices. The ability to share ideas and best practices with colleagues is invaluable, and it's through collaboration that we can refine our skills and enrich our teaching. This kind of reflective practice is key to continued professional growth and maintaining a high standard of care for the children and families within our community.

It is also imperative to note visible shift in the classroom since the COVID-19 pandemic. As an educator, I felt firsthand the impact of on the classroom that the pandemic had. Extreme staffing-shortages made it almost impossible to provide routine, continuous care for the children in our care, as well as contributed to furthering burnout and declining wellbeing for myself and my colleagues. Retaining our staff was a daily struggle, but even more so was filling empty positions due to the lack of qualified and trained educators.

I now serve as an instructional coach for early educators through NeighborImpact Child Care Resources pilot project, WorkForce Fast Track (WFFT). Through the WFFT program, early educators participate in a six-month cohort that provides early educators with direct supports and professional development through personalized coaching and a curated training schedule that helps educators refine their skills and expand their knowledge, helping to sustain them as equipped and well-prepared professionals in the early childhood education and care workforce. This program is designed not just to support the current workforce, but also to help recruit and retain educators in the early childhood education and care field by providing the outreach, resources and career growth opportunities that are often lacking.

As a coach, I now have the privilege of offering the same supports I desperately sought after to the educators I work with. In my role, I ensure that educators receive the support they need to succeed, which includes not just guidance, but the encouragement to explore new approaches and strategies. I facilitate collaboration among educators so they can learn from each other and grow together. I use parallel processing throughout our observations and reflective meetings, allowing educators to observe and discuss their teaching in real-time, fostering a deeper level of understanding and improvement. I work to build confidence, encouraging educators to trust in their abilities and take on new challenges, while also helping them navigate setbacks. This includes equipping them with strategies for managing disappointments and expanding their mindset—helping them see challenges as opportunities for growth rather than obstacles.

Through the WFFT program, I have seen firsthand the remarkable benefits educators gain. They expand their knowledge on Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), which leads to higher quality care for children and families. As they deepen their understanding of child development and best practices, they are better equipped to create positive, nurturing environments for every child. I have also seen many educators pursue higher education opportunities, motivated by the growth mindset fostered through WFFT. This not only advances their careers but also deepens their commitment to the work they do.

Perhaps most importantly, WFFT helps educators develop more confidence in their roles and builds a sense of community among them. They no longer feel isolated but are part of a supportive, collaborative network. And they begin to truly understand the importance of this work—the profound impact they have on the lives of children and families, and the essential role they play in shaping our future. As educators gain confidence and support, retention rates improve, and the workforce becomes more stable, which benefits not just the educators but the children and families they serve. Over the course of the WFFT, launched in the Spring of 2022, we have helped recruit and retain nearly 70 teacher-qualified educators into the early learning workforce. Helping contribute to fully-staffed programs, and increasing capacity for programs and opening up more childcare slots for families within Deschutes County.

The support systems provided through WorkForce Fast Track are not just helpful—they are transformative. By offering educators the collaboration, support, and mindset shifts they need, we ensure that they can continue to provide the best possible care and education for the children they serve. The support of a program like the WFFT program, is not only investing in educators, but ultimately in the future of our children; and ensuring that early educators have access to the kind of professional support that is needed to further recruit and sustain a high-quality and effective workforce.

I urge you to recognize the profound impact that House Bill 3008 can have on early childhood education in Oregon. By supporting this bill, you are making an investment in the educators who shape the future of our children and our communities. The WFFT program is proof of the transformative power of collaboration, support, and professional development. I ask for your continued commitment to ensuring that all early educators have access to the resources they need to succeed. Let us work together to build a stronger, more effective workforce for the children and families who depend on us. Your support of this bill is a step toward a brighter future for everyone.

With appreciation,
Kenzie Kihs