

## **Priority Issue: Early Care and Education 2012**

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 depend 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.

In its Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Fund application, Ohio outlined comprehensive early childhood system reform, particularly in areas serving low-income and non-English language speaking children. We support the plan outlined by the administration in the grant application with emphasis on the items listed below. We also support prioritizing state funding in quality early learning systems and programs because of the significant lifetime return on investment that they achieve.

### **Ohio United Way supports the following initiatives:**

- Developing a comprehensive, multi-dimensional Kindergarten entry assessment
- Maintaining and 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
- Funding for the child care quality rating system, Step Up to Quality, and the teacher training scholarship program, TEACH
- Maintaining subsidized child care for children in low-income families
- Funding for comprehensive early childhood behavioral health
- Maintaining access to family supports and parenting education for vulnerable families
- Integrating all early childhood programs under a single state system that will eliminate duplicative licensing, automate payment systems, and increase efficiency and effectiveness.