

## **HELP Committee Testimony**

Paula Polito, Ph.D.

Thank you, Chairman Cassidy, Ranking Member Sanders, and members of the Committee. I am Paula Polito, owner and director of Beary Cherry Tree Child Development Center in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, Chair of the Louisiana Department of Education Early Childhood Advisory Board, and 2026 Chair of the Jefferson Chamber of Commerce—the first childcare provider to lead this organization in its history.

I come from a three-generation family legacy in early childhood education. For 26 years, I have witnessed firsthand the transformative potential of quality early learning. Today, I want to share how Louisiana has built a system that is a national exemplar worthy of preservation and investment.

### **Louisiana's Partnership-Built System**

What sets Louisiana apart is partnership. Louisiana currently serves over 55,000 children ages birth to five who are economically disadvantaged through more than 1,700 licensed child care centers. But these numbers tell only part of the story.

Every publicly-funded child care center, Head Start program, and school serving young children receives a Performance Profile that includes a rating based on rigorous classroom observations using the CLASS tool—the Classroom Assessment Scoring System. As someone who has worked extensively with CLASS as both a practitioner and as the state's CLASS expert, I can tell you this is not paperwork compliance. This is about understanding how teacher-child interactions drive learning and development.

Performance Profiles include information on best practices—use of ongoing assessment, high-quality curriculum, teacher credentials, and program investment in high levels of individual attention for children. Providers like me partner with the Louisiana Department of Education to facilitate two observations per classroom each year, ensuring consistency and accountability. The results speak for themselves: over 95 percent of Louisiana's centers are rated Proficient or above, and over 70 percent are rated High Proficient or Excellent.

This didn't happen by accident. It happened because Louisiana chose to build a system rooted in collaboration rather than top-down mandates. Direct service providers, state agencies, and community stakeholders work together toward shared goals. This is the kind of partnership that creates lasting change.

### **Accountability That Works**

Louisiana has also demonstrated leadership in attendance verification—a critical accountability component. Daily licensing inspections are conducted statewide, with 25 to 30 percent of centers receiving unannounced monthly compliance visits.

In 2023, Louisiana began transitioning to KinderConnect, offering multiple validated attendance methods—from tablets with photo ID verification to secure mobile apps. This modernization promotes consistency, strengthens fraud prevention, and simplifies operations without compromising security.

### Why This System Is Investable

From my perspective as both a provider and business leader, Louisiana's early childhood education system represents the kind of infrastructure investment our nation needs. This is not a social service—this is economic infrastructure.

At Beary Cherry Tree Child Development Center, my teachers average 12 years of tenure. We maintain exceptional student-teacher ratios. We create the conditions where children thrive and families can work. And we do this within a system that supports quality through meaningful accountability, professional development, and genuine partnership.

Through my work with the Jefferson Chamber of Commerce, I've seen firsthand how business leaders understand what many policymakers are still learning: quality early childhood education is workforce development infrastructure. When working parents can't find reliable, high-quality care, businesses can't retain employees. When children don't receive quality early learning experiences, we pay the price in remediation costs throughout their K-12 education and beyond.

Louisiana has built a system where quality is defined not by inputs alone but by outcomes—where providers are treated as professional partners rather than vendors to be managed. This approach has created a network of programs that are accountable, effective, and continuously improving.

### A System Worth Preserving and Growing

What Louisiana has built took decades of intentional partnership. It required state leadership willing to invest in infrastructure, data systems, professional development, and genuine collaboration with providers. It required providers willing to be held accountable and to continuously improve. And it required a shared understanding that early childhood education is not just childcare—it's the foundation of all learning that follows.

This system is worthy of preservation and growth. As federal policymakers consider investments in early childhood education, I urge you to look at models like Louisiana's—systems built on partnership, focused on quality outcomes, and designed to support both children and the providers who serve them.

The infrastructure is already here. The partnerships are in place. The accountability systems work. What we need now is the sustained federal investment to expand and strengthen what works.

Thank you for your time, and I welcome your questions.