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Committee on Education and the Workforce
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Good morning Chairman Rokita, Ranking Member Polis, and Members of the Committee; thank you for inviting me to testify today about opportunities for early childhood programs. I'm the President & CEO of Mile High Early Learning, the largest and oldest provider of subsidized early care and education in Denver, Colorado providing care to more than 500 children in Denver's most impoverished neighborhoods. We provide high-quality early childhood programs, including Head Start, Early Head Start, and child care services and were recently awarded an Early Head Start/Child Care Partnership grant.

We have an enormous responsibility. We are entrusted by parents, most of them living at or below poverty level working hard to improve their family's circumstance, to care for their children and help prepare them for school, so they can grow, learn, and thrive. Because of the wide array of services we use to do this, we have several federally funded early learning programs that are tailored to specific goals. These include Head Start/Early Head Start, the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG), and IDEA—Individuals with Disabilities Education Act—Part B and Part C. These programs provide complementary rather than duplicative services, with each targeting a unique population or specific need.

First, I want to share why we do what we do. Children are born with 100 billion neurons—that's as many stars as in the Milky Way—and it's through the quality of interactions with caring, responsive adults that children grow and thrive. 85% of brain development occurs before a child even starts kindergarten. The more experiences and opportunities children have to activate those neurons, the more successful they will be in life. Differences or delays in child development can be detected as early as 9 months old. By 3 years, children from backgrounds with limited opportunities will have heard 30 million fewer words. By 3rd grade, children not proficient in reading are less likely to graduate high school. Reaching these children in the early years of their lives is critical.

Head Start provides comprehensive services to low income children ages 3 to 5 years and their families. These services include physical and oral health, nutrition, mental health, and family support services along with high-quality early childhood education and services specific for

children with disabilities. Early Head Start provides these same services to pregnant women and children birth to 3 years old. At Mile High Early Learning, we serve 269 Head Start and 115 Early Head Start children. Over 95% of our families live at or below the federal poverty level (\$24,600 for a family of four) and are impacted by the adverse effects of poverty. By using a whole child approach—focusing on their physical, social, and emotional development and supporting their family, we can have a positive impact on their lives. And we do. At the beginning of the year, only 60% of our children are at a developmentally appropriate level, but by the end of the year, more than 90% are meeting developmental benchmarks.

Head Start's federal to local funding model allows programs to be responsive to the specific needs of the community while ensuring the highest quality services for the most vulnerable children. We have seven early learning centers in Denver, and each is a unique community. One center serves predominantly Spanish-speaking families; another serves mostly refugee families who speak 22 different languages from Somalia, Myanmar, and Sudan; while another is in a historically African American neighborhood now dealing with the impact of gentrification. We maintain our high quality programming and meet the needs of the diverse groups of children and families at all of our centers.

Through the federal Early Learning Challenge grant that Colorado was awarded, we have developed a Quality Rating and Improvement System for all state licensed child care providers that uses many of the Head Start Program Performance Standards as indicators of quality including parent engagement in their child's education, highly qualified teachers, and comprehensive services.

The Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) provides child care subsidies for parents with children up to age 12 years who are working or going to school. In our program, we serve 160 families with child care subsidies. Families are eligible if they earn less than 85% of the state median income. In Colorado, as a local control state, individual county human services determine the income eligibility for families to participate, which can vary from 130% to 225% of federal poverty guidelines. CCDBG also provides funds for quality improvement, and Colorado has invested additional funding for child care subsidies to serve infants and toddlers. The City of Denver also provided additional funding as part of the Denver Quality Care Initiative Program.

IDEA provides funding for early intervention services for children birth to 5 years with disabilities or developmental delays. Between 14-18% of our enrolled children have disabilities that include speech/language and cognitive or physical delays. At Mile High Early Learning, we also have four inclusive classrooms that provide services for 32 children transitioning from Part C (infants and toddlers) to Part B (preschool). Funding from IDEA supports our costs for specialists, adaptive equipment and materials, and teacher training.

We support the most recent federal changes to Head Start and CCDBG that continue to ensure high-quality services to children and families.

New Head Start Program Performance Standards continue to set a high bar for quality early care and education programs. Head Start has always been a pioneer in best practices, such as the requirement that all Head Start teachers have at least an Associates of Arts degree in early childhood education, and 50% must have a Bachelor of Arts degree. To ensure that children are receiving the maximum benefit of a quality program, Head Start is now requiring programs to serve all children for a minimum of 1020 hours per year, which translates into more than six hours a day or more days. Unfortunately, without more funding for additional staff, equipment, and materials, we will not be able to continue serving the same number of children.

We are also grateful for the reauthorization of CCDBG that clearly identifies quality child care as a necessary work support as well as a support for children to be ready for school. However, gaps in ensuring access exist. Even though nearly two-thirds of Colorado children under 6 have both parents in the workforce, not even a quarter (23%) of all 4-year-olds and just 8% of all 3-year-olds are enrolled in preschool, which means over 11,000 4 year olds in Colorado had no access to preschool. For the Colorado Preschool Program (CPP), waitlists reached 4,000 statewide, and in 2015, the state estimated that about 8,400 at-risk 4-year-olds had no preschool available to them through either CPP or Head Start in the 2015-16 school year. In licensed child care, Colorado has gone from 26% of children in a program in high quality care to 45%, while serving the same number of children. However, child care subsidies in Colorado reach only 13.2% of eligible children, and the state projects that the number of waitlisted families in 2016-17 will be 648.

In Denver, only 60% of children are enrolled in preschool, and our Head Start and Early Head Start programs can serve just a quarter (23%) of eligible children. Our program has waitlists for children of all ages—infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

While child care subsidies help defray the cost of child care, they don't meet the cost of quality child care, which includes comprehensive support services for children and families and highly qualified staff with ongoing professional development. Many of our families have non-traditional work schedules that require care for evenings and weekends.

There's also a shortage of highly qualified early childhood education teachers, which is estimated to grow by 20% or more over the next decade. Staff turnover is high in ECE programs averaging 30% with low wages being a key factor. In Colorado, the average wage for a child care teacher is approximately \$11 per hour. In public schools, teachers with similar credentials earn \$23 per hour.

Most recently, our Early Head Start/Child Care Partnership grant allows us to serve 80 more children in the three high-poverty areas in Colorado through partnerships with other early education providers that include high-quality, center-based, charter school, and family child care homes with Head Start's comprehensive services.

The bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) encourages greater coordination within states including requiring Local Education Agencies (LEA) to develop agreements with Head Start and other early learning programs to support children's transition into kindergarten and services for children with special needs. Colorado's ESSA plan aligns our Early Childhood Competencies for Educators and Administrators and long-term commitment to building the workforce supporting children birth through age 8 years.

We have also benefited from coordination efforts within Colorado with the Departments of Human Services and Education and the Head Start State Collaboration Office. The Early Childhood Leadership Commission is a statewide advisory board and recently published the Early Childhood Workforce Plan 2020, an ambitious plan to address the issues of teacher shortages, compensation, and quality through innovative practices and funding streams as a joint project of the Colorado Department of Human Services and Colorado Department of Education and which builds upon our state CCDBG plan.

By successfully coordinating these federal programs (CCDBG, Head Start, IDEA, ESSA, Early Learning Challenge) at the state and local levels, Colorado has been able to better address our access and quality gaps. From discussions over the years with my colleagues from other states, it is evident that this systemic collaboration has had similar positive effects across the country.

The benefits of high quality early care and education programs are clear. Children who participate in Head Start and other high quality early childhood programs have:

- Increased high school graduation, higher attendance at college, and greater income levels
- Decreased need for special education services, reduced grade repetition, lowered child mortality rates (by 50%), and decreased involvement with criminal justice system.

Long-term impacts for children show:

- Higher executive functioning—problem solving, decision making, and perseverance; better social skills, self-esteem, with sizable benefits for at-risk children—low income, children of color, children in foster care, English Language Learners.

There's also a benefit to parents of children in Head Start—they read more often with their child, have better parenting skills, and are more involved in their child's education.

A conservative estimate in Colorado recently found that the early care and education sector produces over \$639 million and 22,000 jobs annually, generates \$4.4 billion in earnings annually by enabling parents to work, and saves the economy \$832 million each year due to the long-term effects of a quality early education (e.g., avoided special education and juvenile justice costs, and increased lifetime earnings). James Heckman, Nobel Prize economist, shows that there is a 7 to 13% return on investment when funding early learning programs.

The true importance of our work is that we are moving families towards self-sufficiency, supporting children to achieve their potential, and ensuring that everyone can be contributing, valuable members of our communities.

Thank you again for this opportunity.