

## Opinion: Data proof Ohio is failing its kids. Mike DeWine can change that.

Lynanne Gutierrez

Guest columnist



Lynanne Gutierrez is the chief operating and policy officer for Groundwork Ohio, a nonpartisan public-policy research and advocacy organization that champions high-quality early learning and healthy development of children prenatally to age 5.  
*Submitted*

Gov. Mike DeWine [recently said](#), “I have a vision for Ohio to be the best place in the nation to have a baby and raise a family.”

[Groundwork Ohio](#) – our state’s leading advocacy organization focused on issues impacting the prenatal period to age five – couldn’t agree more.

But, aspirational goals aside, how will we know if every child in Ohio has the opportunity to reach their full potential?

More than two years ago, [Groundwork Ohio](#) set out to answer this question. Following extensive research, fact-gathering, and input from children and family experts throughout the state, the result is the ["Early Childhood Dashboard"](#) – a first-of-its-kind, data-driven analysis of

Ohio's early childhood strengths and challenges. It incorporates more than 60 metrics that examine the systems, community conditions, and outcomes required to ensure young children are healthy, ready to learn, and prepared for the future.

Most importantly, as our governor and legislature develop Ohio's two-year budget in the coming months, it should serve as an indispensable tool that illuminates areas in need of increased investment, focused attention, and urgent action.

The harsh reality is, today, Ohio is far from the best place to be a young child. Changing this trajectory and putting us on a path to becoming a healthier, more productive, and economically vibrant state will require state investment.

The goal of reaching a first birthday should be the floor, not the ceiling of success. Yet, in Ohio, infant mortality rates continue to be worse than the U.S. average, with a large and appalling racial disparity; and more young children experience child abuse or neglect before they turn one than in most other states.

Additionally, access to quality early learning is vital to supporting and maintaining a child's overall health and well-being, as well as their readiness for school and life. [As DeWine astutely put it](#), "what we know from the data is that daycare that is of high quality changes outcomes. If it's not of high quality...it does not really impact that child's future."

The data shows that we are failing on this front as well, as most of Ohio's youngest children are not being served by quality early learning programs. For example, less than 1 in 5 Ohio babies (age 0-2) from families with low incomes have access to any early learning program.

So, unfortunately, it comes as no surprise that as we track a child's journey through elementary school, the numbers show that young Ohioans are largely unprepared to learn. More than 6 in 10 Ohio kids are not ready for school when they get to kindergarten, lack fourth-grade reading proficiency, and lack eighth-grade math proficiency—all predictors of future success.

For the health, well-being, and economic strength of our state today and in the future, there is nothing more crucial in the upcoming state budget than addressing these shortcomings.

The governor is right and the data is clear that the first years of life are the most important years for a child's development. Investments in early childhood not only benefit the well-being of children and their families, but they pay dividends to the state and our economy.

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