

Good afternoon, my name is Kimberly Pena-Molina and I serve as the Early Care and Education Manager for the Montgomery County Children's Opportunity Alliance, which connects our community to build an equitable, accessible, high-quality, and sustainable early childhood system.

As a former Child Care Center director, I know first-hand that quality doesn't always equal the degree that a person holds. I have known lead teachers with Master's Degrees in Early Childhood who lack the warmth, creativity, and engagement skills essential for building the trusting relationships young children need in order to learn. Likewise, I have employed aids with no formal degrees that get a classroom full of preschoolers to dive into learning in the most amazing ways.

The problem is, as a society, we do not value early childhood educators as the vital professionals they are. The profession lacks a unified framework for career pathways, competencies, and standards across settings and states. Leaders are working on change, however, with a severe workforce shortage, our communities are suffering, and immediate action is needed to grow the profession.

The Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services, which serves as our local Child Care Resource and Referral Center, now offers Core of Knowledge classes in Farsi, and are conducting outreach to our growing migrant population. Outreach partners reported that while many women were interested, they were unable to provide high school equivalency documentation due to incomplete education or difficulty obtaining records from their home countries. This is particularly true for women from Afghanistan, a country which is known to devalue the education of women. These women are willing to earn their GED, but they need to work now to support their families. House Bill 1303 would allow them to secure a job in a child care center, on a team with other teachers and under the supportive supervision of administration, while furthering their education.

The Children's Opportunity Alliance respectfully urges the Ways and Means Committee to make a favorable report on HB 1303—as it will break down barriers and help to ease the early care and education workforce shortage we are facing.