

**By Ali Schatz, Eric McDowell, Chapin Fausel and Julie Wilkins
Eastern High School, Louisville KY**

(Address the other students in the room)

My name is Ali Schatz and I am a senior at Eastern High School in Jefferson County. To start off I'd like to address all the students present today, please raise your hand if you once attended preschool. [PAUSE]. We are some of the top students in our schools and it is by no coincidence that our education began in a preschool setting. Preschool is crucial to the development of every aspect of a child's life: cognitive, social, and physical.

Research shows that all children, but especially those who are most vulnerable, benefit from a quality preschool education. Quality preschool programs can give these three- and four- year- old children an equal opportunity to be successful in school and beyond. Currently four- year-old children are eligible for the state-funded preschool or Head Start only if they live at or below 150% of the poverty level or have a disability. That means thousands of children in low income families do not have access to these programs. Kentucky needs to make quality preschool available for all children and begin by increasing eligibility from 150% to 200% of the federal poverty level. One example is a Larue County grandmother who said:

"My children and their spouses work in various jobs, barely seeming to make ends meet at times. They all make far too much money to qualify for Head Start but not near enough to pay for the only available private preschool in Larue County. ... I am a single grandmother working hard toward an age and financial situation to be able to retire ...but my grandchildren deserve to have quality education at whatever the cost.

Therefore, retirement will be put on hold while I pay tuition so that my grandchildren can start public kindergarten ... on a level playing (learning) field with the other children. ... I know that every child caught in the middle like this does not have a grandparent who is able to help. Where do THEY turn?"

Children need the best quality early care and education, so expanding access to preschool must be done by involving community-based child care and Head Start programs. Local community leaders need to figure out the best way to offer preschool for more children by using existing facilities and programs. That might mean providing preschool in a school building, a quality child care center or a Head Start program. Through a collaborative process children win because the adults in their community would decide how these programs can work together to provide quality early care and preschool.

Because preschool has been proven to provide the foundation for educational and life long success, it is absolutely vital that we provide this necessary service to all of our young children. Besides benefiting individual children this will also be an investment in the in the state. Research across the United States has found a return ranging from 2-17 dollars per every dollar invested in quality preschool programs for at-risk children.

I'd like to address the students here once more. Please raise your hand if you are certain that you will one day be graduating from a Kentucky high school. [PAUSE] Keep your hands raised if you plan on voting once you turn 18. As you can see, 100% of students in this room will be high school graduates, and a majority of them will be voting as your constituents in November. We are some of the top members of our graduating class and it is by no coincidence that our education began with preschool. Preschool

provided a solid foundation for our education and a diploma will provide a foundation for the rest of our lives. We need to ensure that the upcoming generations will be offered this critical opportunity to thrive.