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Investing in Early Learning Is Investing in Families Like Ours
By Katie Broadfoot, MPA, Executive Director of Pathways

Last spring, the Rogers family celebrated a milestone many of us take for granted: paying off their car loan. For this family of four, both parents working full-time, the relief of owning their car outright meant fewer sleepless nights worrying about repossession or late fees. It meant the children could get to Compass Early Learning Center safely each morning. It meant breathing room.

But only a few weeks later, that breathing room for so many families was snatched away when the state cut On My Way Pre-K funding in half. For families like the Rogers, who were already balancing on a financial tightrope, the significant reduction in support for their children's education could be devastating. Affordable, high-quality early learning is not a luxury. It is the scaffolding that allows parents to work, build stability, and begin moving toward long-term financial security.

These cuts place programs like Compass Early Learning Center, which accept state and federal vouchers while also offering our own sliding fee scale, in an untenable position. We are left figuring out how to close the sudden gap between the state's reimbursement rate and the true cost of care, expecting the federal voucher program to follow suit. This is not a burden that working families—already stretched to their limits—should be expected to bear. Public policy must reflect the reality that access to affordable, high-quality early learning is a shared responsibility, not a weight shifted onto those least able to carry it.

At Compass Early Learning Center, the families we serve are some of the hardest working people in Monroe County. They have jobs, pay taxes, and are striving toward financial security. Yet, they fall into a gap, earning too much to qualify for many traditional subsidies but not nearly enough to cover the true costs of quality childcare. These are families who can make ends meet most months, but one unexpected car repair, medical bill, or, as we've just seen, the loss of a voucher, can topple their stability.

Take Lianna Johnson, a single mother whose daughter has thrived at Compass. With access to a sliding fee scale, Lianna has been able to stay in school and work toward buying a home. Her daughter has made remarkable progress in speech development, and the family has shared more than 35 meals together from Pathways' pantry. But without stable early childhood funding to make high-quality, affordable early learning possible, families like Lianna's will be forced to

make impossible choices: Should they leave a steady job to care for their children? Should they pull their children from a safe, nurturing classroom and rely on unstable, and perhaps lesser quality, care arrangements?

When policymakers reduce early education funding, the ripple effects go beyond a single program like Compass Early Learning Center. Employers lose reliable workers. Children lose critical developmental opportunities. Communities lose the chance to build long-term economic mobility for working families.

At Pathways, we know firsthand how essential these investments are. Our goal is to eliminate generational poverty through high-quality early learning and wraparound family support. But we cannot do this alone or without resources. Sustainable, equitable funding for early childhood education is not just a social service expense — it is an investment in a community where every family can thrive.

The Rogers family, the Johnsons, and dozens of others at Compass Early Learning Center are counting on us to remember that behind every line item in a state budget is a child eager to learn, a parent striving to provide, and a family working hard for a better future.

It is time to ensure that early childhood education is not the first place we cut corners, but the foundation we build upon.