

To the attendees of the National Head Start Association Conference,

On behalf of myself and my fellow Franklin County Commissioners, John O'Grady and Kevin Boyce, I want to extend not only our welcome, but our sincere admiration. We are proud to host this year's National Head Start Association Annual Conference right here in Columbus and grateful to share space with so many champions for our youngest neighbors.

To everyone who believes in what's possible when we invest early and equitably in our children, know that you are deeply valued here.

This year, we celebrate 60 years of Head Start. That's six decades of building brighter futures, of helping children learn to read, to lead, and to succeed. But this milestone is more than a celebration. It's proof that when we believe in every child, no matter their background or the balance in their parent's bank account, we don't just change lives, we change the future.

Before I stepped into public office, I managed health services for one of the largest Head Start programs in Georgia. I didn't just witness the impact; I felt it. I saw how those early years could shift the entire trajectory of a child's life, fortify a family, and breathe purpose into the hearts of the educators who show up every single day to make it possible. What I learned is that there is something sacred about beginnings. The first classroom. The first trusted adult outside the home. The first time a child is told, "You belong here." For millions of families, Head Start has been that place. You've ensured children receive the care, nourishment, and support they need. You've empowered parents to become full partners in their child's journey. And you've created a path to opportunity for more than 38 million children.

This moment of celebration is also a moment of reckoning. The future of Head Start, and the futures of the families it serves, is facing a real threat. But this movement has never drawn its strength solely from legislation or line items. Its power lives in the relationships you nurture, the trust you build, and the hope you ignite in every child who walks through your doors. Because when Head Start lays the foundation, it doesn't just change a child's path, it widens the road for generations to come.

So welcome to Franklin County. Not just to a city or a venue, but to a community that shares your values and honors your work. My hope is that this conference reaffirms your purpose, strengthens your resolve, and reminds you that this movement is as powerful and necessary today as it was sixty years ago.

Yours in service,



Erica C. Crawley, JD, MPA

President, Franklin County Board of Commissioners