



Early Childhood Highlights from the 104th Nebraska Legislature First Session, 2015

Balancing a wide variety of public interests and with great bipartisan support, the Nebraska Legislature again recognized the critical importance of children's early years prior to *Sine Die* adjournment of the 2015 legislative session on May 29. The talent of 18 new state senators and our new governor was continuously displayed in thorough research and thoughtful debate. Nebraskans have much to be proud of.

A total of 664 bills were introduced and 209 became law. Though it was a 90-day session, time was of the essence. Many bills remain in Committee or in the early stages of floor debate, now awaiting the Legislature to reconvene in January 2016. Focus on education and education funding will continue this interim and into the next legislative session.

Of preeminent importance to First Five Nebraska is public policy that recognizes the development of the brain in the early years literally shapes the learning capacity for the rest of a child's life. We know that by the time children arrive at their first day of kindergarten, the nature and quality of their earliest learning experiences have already done much to determine their degree of linguistic competence, ability to interact with others and healthy curiosity about the world around them. A summary of our highest priority bills from the 2015 legislative session is provided here. You may also visit the [First Five Nebraska website](#) for a comprehensive list of all early childhood bills introduced this legislative session.

On behalf of First Five Nebraska, I would like to extend our continued condolences to the Chris Keetle family. In addition, we applaud Senator Jeremy Nordquist for his service as a state senator and recognize his many contributions to ensuring that Nebraska children are well prepared to succeed in school and in life.

We still have much to do, and I hope you will join us in the year ahead as we continue our work to change public policy by changing the public conversation for Nebraska's youngest children.

Sincerely,

Jen Goettemoeller
Senior Policy Associate
jgoettemoeller@firstfive-nebraska.org

LB81: Eliminating the Child Care Cliff Effect

In Nebraska, the number of children ages 0-5 at risk of failing in school is over 64,000 (42% of children 0-5). Child care assistance helps only a fraction of those children, and many families who do receive assistance find it difficult to move up in the workplace because they may lose their ability to afford child care when they accept small pay increases and promotions. On May 27, Governor Pete Ricketts signed into law LB81, eliminating the cliff effect for child care assistance.

This allows families a 24-month window to accept small pay raises and promotions while working their way off of assistance.

[First Five Nebraska's written testimony on LB81.](#)

“A raise, while well earned and certainly important to career progress, is not enough to cover the cost of child care. LB81 is a solution to this cliff effect.”

*Senator Tanya Cook
Health and Human Services
Committee Hearing, 2/26/15*

LB322: Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit

As introduced, LB322 increases the amount of child care and dependent care tax credits from 25 to 30 percent of the federal credit allowed for a taxpayer earning more than \$52,000 per year. For taxpayers making less than \$52,000, the percentage of the federal credit shall be 30 percent for incomes between \$32,000 and \$52,000, and 100 percent for incomes less than \$32,000.

The federal credit covers no more than 35 percent of qualifying child care expenses, so increasing the state tax credit allows parents greater opportunity to choose quality child care settings that provide stimulating experiences for their young learners.

The [Revenue Committee](#) advanced LB322 to General File with [AM809](#). LB322 will remain on General File until the Legislature reconvenes in January 2016.

[First Five Nebraska's written testimony on LB322.](#)

LB443: Mental Health Services for Special Education Students

LB443 redefines support services under the Special Education Act to include mental health services offered either at the school or elsewhere, including assessments, family education services and programs designated by the Division of Behavioral Health at the [Department of Health and Human Services](#). Access to these services will help children succeed in school by addressing certain challenging behaviors and ensuring positive behavioral support.

The [Education Committee](#) did not take action on LB443, so it will be held over until the Legislature reconvenes in January 2016.

LB489: Encouraging Child Care/School Partnerships

Allowing school districts and child care providers to partner to receive grants funded by the [Sixpence Early Learning Fund](#), LB489 gives communities another option for closing the achievement gap for Nebraska's youngest, [most at risk children](#). Closing the gap early is critical because a significant number of children arrive at kindergarten unprepared to learn and developmentally behind their more advantaged peers.

Most families need full-day, year-round early learning opportunities that match their work schedules, and most school districts lack the space and resources necessary to address the need. LB489 overcomes these factors by making private child care part of the solution. [AMI275](#) amended LB489 into [LB547](#), which was passed by the Legislature and signed by the Governor.

[First Five Nebraska's written testimony on LB489.](#)

LB525: Technical Bill for the Nebraska Department of Education

On May 27, the Governor signed into law LB525, a technical cleanup bill introduced for the [Nebraska Department of Education](#). Included in its broad scope was an early childhood component clarifying that any early childhood provider (not just those enrolled in [Step Up to Quality](#)) can participate in the Nebraska Early Childhood Professional Record System. The bill also makes it easier for school districts serving large concentrations of children in poverty to receive education aid for students served in early childhood education programs.

“While Sixpence itself is a great example of public and private resources coming together to fund quality early childhood, I think it’s the local partnerships it promotes that are truly powerful. This is because these local partnerships can leverage additional private resources and provide a platform by which to scale up the Legislature’s early childhood efforts over time.”

*K.C. Belitz
Columbus Area Chamber of
Commerce/Nebraska Early Childhood
Business Roundtable | Education
Committee Hearing, 3/9/15*

LB547: Utilizing Child Care Providers to Close the Achievement Gap

LB547 provides funds for locally designed and family-friendly approaches to eliminating the achievement gap in Nebraska's youngest learners by (1) encouraging partnerships between private [child care providers](#) and school districts (funding [Sixpence](#) grants proposed in [LB489](#)), and (2) supporting and rewarding child care providers who improve the quality of the environments they offer to children in their care by participating in Nebraska's [Step Up to Quality](#) accountability system.

Further, LB547 makes important strides in supporting the professional development of the [early childhood workforce](#), encouraging the proliferation of qualified, highly skilled early educators throughout the state.

Supported by the [Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry](#) and the [Nebraska Early Childhood Business Roundtable](#), as well as a [many other partners](#) committed to building Nebraska's future workforce and ensuring the strongest return on public investments, LB547 was signed into law by Governor Ricketts on May 27.

[First Five Nebraska's written testimony on LB547.](#)

LB557: Nebraska Clean Indoor Air Act in Child Care

Recognizing child care as a place of employment while acknowledging the detrimental effect of second-hand smoke on children, LB557 amends the Nebraska Clean Indoor Air Act. The bill broadens the definition of place of employment to include (1) private residences if the residence is licensed to provide child care, and (2) motor vehicles used to transport children for a licensed child care provider.

The [Health and Human Services Committee](#) did not take action on LB557, so it will be held over until the Legislature reconvenes in January 2016.

LB645: Tax Credits for Early Childhood Workforce Development

LB645 creates a nonrefundable tax credit for any individual, partnership, LLC, trust, estate or corporation that makes a contribution to a nationally licensed organization that

“We [child care providers] see ourselves as a critical part of the solution to closing the achievement gap because the environments we offer to children in our care are healthy, stable, and stimulating...

Many child care providers want the opportunity to partner with schools but that's just not an option at this time. It's one thing to tell schools and child care providers to partner or that they can partner. It's another thing to put a few dollars on the table to encourage those partnerships. LB547 does that.”

*Suzanne Schneider
Nebraska Child Care Center Directors
Association | Health and Human
Services Committee Hearing, 2/26/15*

provides early childhood education and retention incentives for early childhood education professionals.

The [Revenue Committee](#) did not take action on LB645, so it will be held over until the Legislature reconvenes in January 2016.

[First Five Nebraska's written testimony on LB645.](#)

LB656: Budget Bill

Making strategic investments based on proven outcomes is not only wise, it saves taxpayer dollars. The mainline budget bill, LB656, introduced by Speaker Galen Hadley at the request of the Governor, included stable funding for high-quality early childhood investments in Sixpence and the [Nebraska Department of Education preschool grant program](#).

[Learn more about the biennium budget.](#)