

7 March 2017

Senator John Stinner, Chair  
Members of the Appropriations Committee  
Nebraska Unicameral Legislature

Chairman Stinner and Members of the Appropriations Committee,

First Five Nebraska works to ensure that more of our state's youngest children start off with the kinds of early developmental experiences that will prepare them to enter the K-12 system ready to learn and thrive. Our efforts focus specifically on narrowing the early achievement gap that threatens the academic success and lifelong trajectories of nearly 65,000 Nebraska children at risk between birth and age 5. We use neuroscientific and economic data to inform public policies that not only promote school readiness, but offer the level of quality and fiscal accountability taxpayers should expect for the dollars they commit to the early development of our youngest Nebraskans.

We commend the Committee for taking time to assess the educational landscape in Nebraska and consider the complex challenges of maintaining the standards of excellence set by our public schools. We recognize our collective responsibility to optimize the dollars we invest in educating our young citizens and future workers while staying within severe budgetary constraints that cut across every public system in our state. With that in mind, we also ask you to reflect on how targeted investments in young children, especially those facing early developmental risks, can increase the efficiency of our education system, strengthen the workforce and advance the long-term prosperity and quality of life of all Nebraskans in the decades ahead.

Neuroscientists, education professionals, business leaders and economists understand the first five years of life are critical to children's lifelong trajectories. During this time—and especially in the first three years—children build the core neural architecture that supports all future learning, skill formation and achievement. Consistently stimulating, supportive early life experiences create the robust neural circuitry necessary for an expanding array of skills, competencies and behaviors essential to success in school and society.

Alarming, 41% of Nebraska's children between birth and age 5 begin their lives in circumstances that can lead to sub-optimal brain development, lower language and communications skills, lower critical reasoning and judgment skills, and a reduced level of social competency. Children who lack consistent, high-quality early experiences are known to show serious developmental disparities by 18 months of age, or even earlier. By the time they arrive at kindergarten, they are already well behind their peers and are likely to remain behind up throughout their time in the K-12 system.

All too often, Nebraska taxpayers must absorb the cost of special education and behavioral health services to mitigate problems that are likely to persist, even with the benefit of school-age interventions.

Further, low levels of academic achievement and executive function skills – that is, the ability to control impulses, retain and interpret information, and adapt to changing circumstances or expectations— are known predictors of risky and unhealthy behaviors that may lead to problems such as substance abuse, dependency on public assistance and participation in the criminal justice system. Strategic interventions focused on children’s healthy early development are much less costly—and much more effective— than efforts to correct serious cognitive, social and emotional problems later in life.

Naturally, we acknowledge the challenge Nebraska’s legislators face in setting a balanced, fiscally responsible budget in our current economic climate. We greatly appreciate the good judgment and strategic vision our legislators have already shown in the preliminary budget by preserving investments in the Early Childhood Grant Program serving four-year-olds, Sixpence, *Step Up to Quality* and other early care and education initiatives. We particularly commend Chairman Stinner for his insight and leadership on this issue, and greatly value our ongoing work with him to engage school administrators in discussions about their districts’ early childhood education needs.

Dollar for dollar, there are few public or private investments that produce the kinds of individual, social and economic returns offered by a commitment to quality early childhood experiences targeted at our youngest, most vulnerable Nebraskans. Recent research by Nobel prize-winning economist James J. Heckman calculates a return of \$13 for each dollar committed to high-quality, birth-to-age-five developmental opportunities for children at risk. Focusing our attention upstream in this way increases the efficiency of our public education dollars, strengthens the state’s talent pipeline, triggers savings to overburdened public systems and drives continuous economic growth. It is worth remembering that we will hold these children responsible for growing cohesive, vibrant families and communities, and enhancing the quality of life of all Nebraskans in the decades ahead. They are well worth the investment.

Thank you for your time and attention to an issue of the greatest importance to our state’s future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Monson', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Andrew Monson  
Policy Associate  
First Five Nebraska