

January 2018

The Honorable Mike Groene, Chair  
Members of the Education Committee  
Nebraska Unicameral Legislature

RE: LB803

Chairman Groene and Members of the Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Jen Goettemoeller and I am here on behalf of First Five Nebraska. We focus exclusively on policies impacting young children at risk of failing in school, and the early experiences that close the achievement gap at the time it is most effective and least expensive to do so.

In some ways, LB803 may seem very simple, but there are a lot of layers to the issues within. As you consider this piece of legislation – and others throughout this session – I would encourage you to remember something about the population that will be entering the K-12 system very soon. Of the 154,771 Nebraska children ages 0-5, 39% of them are already likely facing serious obstacles to school success, even at their young age. Attached to my written testimony is a map showing this data statewide. As you consider how to deal with the host of educational and funding issues before you, it may be wise to remember these young learners and what it will mean for our schools, businesses, and communities if they arrive with significant developmental disadvantages.

Senator Stinner is certainly aware of the challenges these numbers pose for state systems and future budgets as a whole. We appreciate his concern for the success of these students and the success of local communities in which they live, in which they will one day work. He has been involved in seeking solutions so young Nebraska learners who face serious risk factors can succeed in school. And he has seen high quality early childhood education in his own district start closing the achievement gap even before kindergarten.

Many of us have seen and heard the challenges schools face in offering these kinds of interventions, particularly in rural areas. LB803 attempts to respond to some of those challenges and we appreciate Senator Stinner's leadership and commitment to finding solutions.

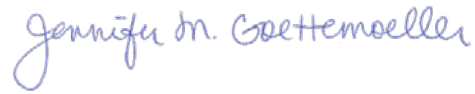
Aside from funding, perhaps the biggest challenge communities face in offering effective early childhood interventions is the lack of an adequate workforce. As we all know, it is the highly skilled, responsive, and encouraging teacher that can make all the difference in learning. Brains are built on interactions. Some of you have heard this simple explanation so pardon the repetition, but think of a tennis court. You know the basics of tennis. One player serves the ball to a player on the other side of the court who hits the ball back in return. That's essentially how our brains are built. When a parent or family member or early childhood professional sings or talks to a young child, that's like serving the ball to their side of the court. When an infant responds by, for example, making eye contact or cooing, it's as if they are hitting the tennis ball back. That back and forth interaction is literally how the neural circuitry in our brains are built. We've all seen it – interacting with our own children or grandchildren, taking a child on a walk outside and talking to them about the nuts and pinecones they find, encouraging them to explore while providing the boundaries for them to do so safely. Children thrive and learn best when they have secure, positive relationships with adults who are knowledgeable about how to support their development and learning, and are responsive to their individual progress. It is that set of skills – knowing how to support their development and learning and responding to their individual progress – that the early childhood workforce must have in order to be effective.

We do not believe that removing the certification requirement for early childhood teachers as proposed in LB803 is the best solution for dealing with the workforce shortage, although we certainly agree that policies must adapt to fit local challenges. By focusing on competencies (rather than degrees), creating non-traditional delivery modes of instruction, and increasing paths to certification (like LB1135 proposes), we can help schools and communities find the workforce they need while ensuring public funds are purchasing quality interventions that reduce the achievement gap. Fortunately, there are a lot of great minds working on this issue who are committed to finding workable solutions. I would ask the Committee to consider their efforts before moving forward with this piece of the bill.

I would call to your attention one other facet of the bill that allows and encourages schools to increase the number of 5-year-olds who are age-eligible for kindergarten to be served in early childhood education programs. It's a small, technical change in the bill found in sections 1, 5, 11, and 13 that changes "kindergarten entrance age" to "enrollment in kindergarten." If a parent believes their 5-year-old is not ready for kindergarten, they currently have the choice to wait a year before enrolling their child in kindergarten. That's the parent's choice and they already have that option. We don't think any changes or additional accommodations are needed. Doing so will have the unintended consequence of decreasing early childhood education options for 3-year-olds, which are already very limited.

I started this testimony by suggesting that LB803 may seem like a simple bill. I would conclude by asking the Committee to utilize the expertise of all those who are currently working on these issues as you decide which pieces of the bill to advance. Thank you for holding this hearing today. It is the first step in gathering information and I appreciate the opportunity to testify. Please let me know if there is any additional information First Five Nebraska can provide.

Thank you,



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