January 30, 2017

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

RE: LB428

Chairman Groene and Members of the Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to express our support for LB428 and the proposed amendment by Senator Vargas.

At First Five Nebraska, our work is focused on efforts that narrow the achievement gap for the 64,729 children ages 0-5 across our state most at risk of failing in school. Our work is driven by neuroscience and data, and a commitment to policies that are evidence-based, cost-efficient and demonstrate strong accountability to Nebraska taxpayers. It is for these reasons that we support Senator Vargas’ amendment to LB428, which adds the following language: “Where possible, reasonable efforts should be made to refer children to child care facilities enrolled in the quality rating and improvement system described in the Step Up to Quality Child Care Act at Step 3 or above.”

There are many factors that can threaten a child’s preparedness to enter and thrive in our state’s K-12 system. Among them, the Nebraska Department of Education includes families in which the parents are younger than age 18 or who have not yet completed high school. Young parents often lack the life experience or practical knowledge necessary to successfully guide a young child’s early learning and healthy development without help. Many are unprepared to recognize and make informed decisions about quality child care arrangements, especially when faced with the challenge of continuing their own education.

As you know, the first three years of life are a critical time in the growth of healthy brain architecture and the formation of essential skills and competencies for school readiness and academic success. Inconsistent or substandard early care and learning experiences in the infant and toddler years do more than decrease children’s prospects for academic success, future employability and self-sufficiency. It also increases the burden on taxpayers to sustain the growing costs of special education, behavioral health services and our state’s corrections system.
Senator Vargas' amendment encourages school districts to refer their students to child care programs participating in Step Up to Quality, Nebraska's child care quality rating and improvement system. Step Up to Quality enables young parents to understand the indicators of quality child care and select their providers accordingly. The system also encourages providers to improve their business practices, pursue the professional development of staff and keep service quality high to meet market demands. Implementing a tiered reimbursement scale based on quality rating scores in the system will also incentivize providers to pursue high-quality standards while offering them a pathway to meet those goals.

As amended, LB428 has the potential to offset the widening achievement gap facing too many young Nebraskans, as well as the subsequent costs to our state’s overburdened taxpayers. It helps ensure more infants and toddlers will benefit from quality child care environments that grow strong neural circuitry needed to support a lifetime of learning and achievement. Further, teen parents who have access to well-designed programs operated by reliable, competent and highly skilled child care professionals are more likely continue their own education and develop the skills they need to become more effective, self-reliant providers for their families.

Higher-quality child care is good for kids, parents, providers and taxpayers. With the proposed amendment, LB428 is a significant step toward reducing the achievement gap for some of Nebraska's most at risk children and we ask you to advance it out of committee.

Sincerely,

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First Five Nebraska