

28 February, 2017

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

RE: LB521

Chairman Groene and Members of the Education Committee,

First Five Nebraska's work focuses on efforts to narrow the achievement gap for our state's 64,279 children between birth and age 5 most at risk of entering the K-12 system developmentally unprepared to learn and thrive. We use neuroscientific research, verifiable child outcome data and economic analysis to advance early care and learning opportunities that meet the high standards of quality and accountability Nebraska taxpayers should expect for their investment in children's early development.

At First Five Nebraska, we are keenly aware of the challenges you and your colleagues in the Legislature face in making fiscally disciplined decisions in the context of a significant budgetary shortfall. New dollars for a broad array of important public services and infrastructure will be sparse in the current biennium, and quite possibly in the budget cycles still ahead of us.

With that in mind, we ask you to consider carefully the proposal offered in LB521 to strengthen our state's commitment to the early education of its youngest children at risk through an adjustment to the TEEOSA formula. We believe continuing this commitment is critical to our state's long-term economic growth and the prosperity of its citizens. Yet, we also recognize this kind of measure should also be expected to reflect a high level of fiscal responsibility to Nebraska's taxpayers.

Last fall, First Five Nebraska and Senator John Stinner convened a series of meetings with school superintendents throughout the state to gain insight into the need for stronger early care and learning opportunities in their districts. These administrators noted the lack of a coherent, statewide vision and plan for early developmental opportunities for children at risk. They commented on the positive results of quality early learning efforts in their own districts, noting higher levels of school readiness and academic achievement. However, they also expressed frustration at the lack of resources to sustain these programs and meet local demand. Several superintendents indicated they are funding early childhood programs entirely with local resources based on evidence that these investments will yield considerable savings for their districts and broader returns for their communities.

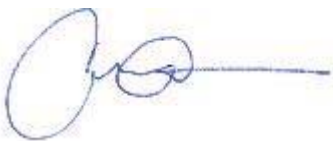
LB521 offers the possibility of addressing many of the concerns we and Senator Stinner heard in the course of these meetings. Strengthening our support for high-quality early learning experiences through an adjustment to the TEEOSA formula in this way would benefit districts statewide, regardless of their equalization status. In effect, it would give children at risk throughout Nebraska quality opportunities for early development, whether they live in the state's major metropolitan areas, or rural and agricultural communities.

However, we also acknowledge that there are areas in which this piece of legislation can be improved to deliver greater fiscal accountability for our investment. Specifically, we believe the bill could be amended to incorporate a mechanism to ensure dollars earmarked through the TEEOSA formula for quality early childhood education are being verifiably allocated for this purpose.

First Five Nebraska encourages Senator Walz to coordinate efforts with the Nebraska Department of Education, local school administrators and other key stakeholders to ensure greater accountability in this proposal. We strongly support efforts to seek out a practical solution that would avoid placing undue fiscal or administrative burdens on Nebraska's local and statewide education systems.

LB521 is built upon a firm understanding of how early experiences strengthen children's neural architecture and advance early skill formation for lifelong success. It recognizes how early developmental opportunities are essential to grow capable, contributing citizens and cohesive communities. It enhances the talent pipeline that feeds the skilled workforce we need to drive the state economy in the decades ahead. With appropriate modifications, we believe it will also live up to the responsibility we owe to Nebraska's taxpayers for their investment in the healthy development of our state's youngest citizens.

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