

17 January 2017

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

RE: LB22

Chairman Stinner and Members of the Appropriations Committee,

I write to you today on behalf of First Five Nebraska to offer our perspective on LB22 and its relation to specific, long-term strategies for our state's ongoing economic growth.

At First Five Nebraska, our work is focused on efforts that narrow the achievement gap for the 62,729 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.

We appreciate that we are in a unique budget climate. With the current year's shortfall of \$276M, we understand cuts are necessary and early childhood is willing to share in the burden. Moving forward in crafting long-term, strategic investments, we would ask you to keep in mind the far-reaching, positive impacts of strategic early childhood investments and why they are a key component of Nebraska's continued economic growth.

Research shows the first three years of life are a critical period of brain development. During this time, children build the core neural foundations that lead to school readiness and ongoing skill development from kindergarten to career. Children's earliest experiences, either positive or negative, determine how well their brains build the neural wiring essential to future learning, judgment and decision making. Unfortunately, 41% of young children in Nebraska ages 0-5 face significant obstacles that can disrupt their developing brain architecture and future learning. This trend is something that state leaders need to be aware of. If we don't intervene strategically, when it makes the most financial sense to do so, the demands on our education system, behavioral health, corrections, public assistance and other systems are only likely to increase.

We are fortunate that Nebraska has taken a unique approach to early childhood education by creating an evidence-based, public-private partnership called the Sixpence Early Learning Fund. Sixpence is a sustainable funding mechanism that combines the investment earnings of public and private dollars and awards them to community-designed early learning partnerships through their local school districts. These partnerships deliver high-quality early learning services to families of children ages 0-3 most at risk of arriving at kindergarten developmentally unprepared to succeed in the K-12 system. A six-member, Governor-appointed Board of Trustees

commissions a rigorous evaluation of Sixpence programs each year from independent researchers at the University of Nebraska Medical Center's Munroe-Meyer Institute. These evaluations have consistently shown that Sixpence is having a positive impact on children's developmental outcomes and on parents' ability to create home environments that support strong early relationships and opportunities for cognitive, social and emotional growth—all factors in children's academic and lifelong trajectories.

Sixpence maximizes the efficient use of resources outside of the TEEOSA formula by making grants available to all communities, regardless of whether the school district is equalized. For these reasons, we ask the Committee to carefully consider the potentially serious effects of a proposed \$200,000 reduction in the state's investment in the Sixpence program—referred to in LB22 as the “Early Childhood Education Grant Program for at-risk children from birth to age three.” Taking into account the additional \$350,000 reduction in base funding for Early Childhood programs in the Governor's FY 2016-17 Budget Adjustments, Nebraska's commitment to the early development of its future citizens and workers is at stake. The economic evidence suggests there are few better uses for our public dollars than quality early learning for children at risk of failing in school. By investing strategically in high-quality care and experiences in the first five years of a child's life, we can narrow the achievement gap facing too many of Nebraska's youngest, most vulnerable children even before they enter kindergarten—creating future savings for the state.

It is critical that we acknowledge the serious budgetary challenges that confront us. I urge you to continue thinking strategically about our state's economic future, and the importance of working toward a Nebraska where every child can grow up to become a thriving, productive and self-sufficient citizen.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jen Goettemoeller".

Jen Goettemoeller, Senior Policy Associate
First Five Nebraska