

19 January 2016

Senator Kate Sullivan, Chair  
Members of the Education Committee  
Nebraska Unicameral Legislature

RE: LB773 and AM1851

Madame Chair and Members of the Education Committee,

For years, this committee has recognized the value of strategic investments in accountable, high quality early childhood education. Thank you for those efforts and for the opportunity to express our support for LB773.

First Five Nebraska's work is driven by neuroscience and data. We focus exclusively on policies impacting children from 0 through age 8 who are at risk of failing in school, and the high quality early childhood experiences that close the achievement gap for those children.

The data is clear that:

1. Experiences in the early years have a direct impact on how children perform in K-12.
2. The most effective early childhood efforts support (not replace) parents in their role as their child's first teacher.
3. The need for quality early childhood education is statewide. This is not something that just impacts Lincoln and Omaha. (See attached map.)

*How do we know there is a workforce shortage?*

Working closely with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services and the Nebraska Department of Education, First Five Nebraska was able to calculate the number of children 0-5 at risk of failing in school who currently participate in some type of early childhood effort whose standards can be substantiated as closing the achievement gap. These children, while experiencing risk factors that would normally severely impede their developmental growth, are now much more likely to arrive at kindergarten on par with their more advantaged peers. That is great news for taxpayers, school districts, and certainly for the children themselves. However, of all the children 0-5 at risk of failing in school (over 64,000 children), only about 27% of them are fortunate enough to have access to these efforts. Unfortunately, we don't have the workforce to adequately serve the other

73%. Nebraska needs nearly 8,000 additional early childhood professionals across the state to serve our young children at risk of failing in school.

In addition to the workforce data, First Five Nebraska hears consistently from communities across the state about their struggles finding a sufficient workforce.

Schools frequently express difficulty finding teachers for their early childhood classrooms, but the need extends far beyond the classroom. A fiscally responsible, locally driven, and family-centered approach to closing the achievement gap for our youngest learners must go beyond the education system. Schools cannot and should not be solely responsible for the educational success of our youngest learners.

Fortunately, child care providers are already located in many communities across the state. But child care providers also have difficulties on the workforce front, including attracting and retaining adequate workers. Many find it difficult to compete with school districts who pay more and often don't work year-round. In addition, most child care providers are seen simply as babysitters. Their work nurturing and developing skills in children is often not recognized, and we don't have a system that allows child care providers (or anyone in the field) to demonstrate their competencies, making it even more difficult to compete.

In some communities, the early childhood momentum is being driven primarily by private business. They know how important early childhood efforts are for their current and future workforce, and are convening members of their community to prepare for the retirement of the few child care providers who exist there, or are planning to grow their early childhood efforts to attract the workforce they need themselves.

### *Do we need legislation?*

Each year state agencies, universities and colleges undertake a significant amount of very important work that creates competing demands for their time and resources. Creating a legislative task force allows the legislature to signal to those state agencies, universities and colleges that the work of the task force should be a priority, as it involves issues of paramount concern to the state.

Further, state agencies sometimes lack authority to make findings and recommendations when participating in non-legislative or executive branch task forces. Passing LB773, will ensure all participants have the authority to make recommendations to the legislature as part of the task force.

Finally, task forces created in the executive branches (like within the Buffett Early Childhood Institute) **must** be created by statute—not legislative resolutions. Also, LRs only last for one year, compete amongst various other LRs within the legislature, and as a result do not receive the same level of prioritization.

### *Why a task force?*

This is an extremely important question. The most straightforward answer is that many of the members listed on the task force do not currently collaborate. However, they each have critical pieces to bring to this important issue. We also don't know what the answers are. In order to fully understand the needs and move forward purposefully, a task force would be most effective.

Fortunately, the task force will have much to draw from and it will be important they consider how to maximize existing resources and efforts.

Timing has never been better. The Buffett Institute has the ability to convene task force members. Our state agencies have expressed their support and desire to participate. Our colleagues in higher education are currently aligning programs across their systems, including between both 2- and 4-year programs. Nebraska's Quality Rating and Improvement System for early childhood programs (called *Step Up to Quality*) has been implemented and the first phase of the independent evaluation is coming in the next couple of weeks.

We have a tremendous opportunity to build a highly impactful early childhood workforce in Nebraska that will no doubt lead to closing the achievement gap during the time it is most effective and least expensive to do so.

I ask that you please advance LB773 with AM1851 from committee for consideration by the entire Legislature.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

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