



5 February 2018

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

RE: LB1135

Chairman Groene and Members of the Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Ben Baumfalk and I am here to represent First Five Nebraska as a proponent of LB1135. First Five Nebraska endorses policies that promote quality early learning environments for children most at risk of failing in school. **First Five Nebraska strongly believes that children, especially those most at risk, require quality early experiences in their natural and inclusive environments if they are to reach their full potential.** We commend Senator Vargas and his staff for offering solutions to address teacher shortages in school- and ESU-based early childhood programs. Although certification is not the only means to a quality early learning environment, it is currently the best proxy we have for these programs.

Evidence is mounting that higher quality early childhood environments result in better developmental outcomes, especially for children of low-income families and those who speak a language other than English at home. Quality early environments can play an important role in reducing grade retention rates, special education placements and in improving children's overall educational attainment. Although many factors contribute to quality interactions between children and their caregivers, the qualifications of staff are among the most important. In a recent report released by the National Conference of State Legislatures, titled *A Fair Start: Ensuring All Students Are Ready to Learn*, a bipartisan commission made up of state legislators and early learning researchers identified professionalizing the preschool to grade 3 workforce as a core strategy in producing world-class early care and education systems.

Ideally, all early learning environments in Nebraska would be staffed by highly skilled professionals who are qualified to nurture the cognitive and socio-emotional development of the children they serve. Realistically, we recognize many school districts and ESUs face challenges in finding certified professionals for their early childhood programs. The Nebraska Department of Education conducts a yearly teacher vacancy survey to identify shortages by endorsement area and region of the state. Early childhood education consistently appeared as a shortage area in each of the past five years. We need to seek out solutions that address the early childhood teacher shortages without compromising the quality of the profession, and thus, the experiences of the children served by these programs. We feel LB1135 does this by offering appropriate, yet flexible, solutions and recommend you vote to advance the bill.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ben Baumfalk', with a large, stylized initial 'B'.

Benjamin Baumfalk
Policy Research Analyst