

9 March 2015

Senator Kate Sullivan, Chair
Education Committee
Nebraska Unicameral Legislature

RE: LB489

Good afternoon Chairwoman, Sullivan, Vice Chair Kolowski, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Jen Goettemoeller, and I am writing on behalf of First Five Nebraska to urge your support of LB489.

On its face, 489 does not necessarily appear extraordinary. There's language in the bill about an Early Childhood Endowment, school districts, child care providers, and something about the Step Up to Quality Child Care Act. It could be a bill you might consider glancing over briefly, with more attention as needed if something important pops up during the hearing. But I think you will see that, with this bill, Senator Sullivan is building on the work the Education Committee has done over the last decade, and has outlined a meaningful path for Nebraska communities to design local efforts that will make great strides in closing the achievement gap for children very much at risk of failing in school.

Research shows the most critical period of brain development takes place during the first three years of life. It is the time that young children are forming key relationships, developing trust, and exploring the world around them. It is also the time when their experiences, either positive or negative, determine how well their brains are wired for future learning, judgment, and decision-making. Children who spend their time in environments that support this critical early development – whether it's at home with parents or elsewhere – arrive at kindergarten with experiences that become their tools to control their emotions, not act on impulse, plan, focus their attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully. Those types of skills do not just appear in adolescence. They must be built, and if they're going to be strong, the foundation must be built in the first three years. The development of the brain in those early years literally shapes the learning capacity for the rest of a child's life.

Unfortunately, there is a growing number of young Nebraska children who face serious threats to their cognitive and character development. 42% of young children in Nebraska ages 0-5 (over 64,000 children) face significant obstacles during their formative years that can disrupt brain architecture and future learning. This trend is something state leaders (especially those in education) need to be aware of because if we don't intervene strategically, when it makes most financial sense to do so, we will continue to have increased demands on not only our education system, but on behavioral health, corrections, and public assistance.

Fortunately, the achievement gap can be closed early when the brain has the most plasticity, or capacity for change. It is easier and less costly to form strong brain circuits during the early years than it is to intervene or "fix" them later. That doesn't mean we should sit babies and toddlers in desks and teach them how to write their name or learn to read. Those cognitive skills can develop later in K-12. Rather, children need responsive relationships from confident, capable parents and the other adults in their lives. "We have long known that interactions with parents, caregivers, and other adults are important in a child's life, but new evidence shows that these relationships *actually shape brain circuits* and lay the foundation for later developmental outcomes, from academic performance to mental health and interpersonal skills."¹

LB489 utilizes an existing public-private early childhood partnership that was built on neuroscience. That public-private partnership is the Sixpence Early Learning Fund (known in statute as the Nebraska Early Childhood Education Endowment). This public-private innovation is funded from the interest off of \$40 million from the Education Lands and Trust Fund, and the interest off of \$20 million in private dollars. The public and private earnings are blended into a Cash Fund and then distributed as grants to schools, in partnership with community providers, to provide high quality services to children 0-3 who are most at risk of failing in school and their parents. Independent evaluation from the University of Nebraska Medical Center is commissioned by the 6-member Governor-appointed Sixpence Board of Trustees.² The annual evaluations have consistently shown Sixpence is not only having a positive impact on child outcomes (cognitive outcomes, such as language, and social/emotional outcomes, such as self-regulation and a decrease in behavioral concerns), but Sixpence is also having a positive impact on the home environment by strengthening parent-child interactions and supporting 12 key parenting behaviors, including things that help parents build strong relationships with their children, promote language development in their children, and support confidence in their children.

LB489 builds on the success of Sixpence by allowing private child care providers to partner with schools to receive grants funded by the Sixpence Early Learning Fund. **This is not currently allowed because the child care provider would have to be a certified teacher.** Under LB489, child care providers who partner with school districts to receive Sixpence funds would be required to participate in the *Step Up to Quality* system, providing the Legislature and the private investors a level of accountability and assurance that the funds are being spent on a quality early childhood environment.

A fiscally responsible, locally driven, and family-centered approach to closing the achievement gap for our youngest learners must go beyond the education system, because schools cannot (and should not) solve this problem on their own. Utilizing private child care providers will maximize resources (schools will not have to expand their programs or prepare more space in their buildings for early childhood programs), reach children where they already are, and better accommodate parents' needs by operating on schedules that school districts simply cannot offer.

¹ Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. Working Paper #1: Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships. Accessed at

http://developingchild.harvard.edu/index.php/resources/reports_and_working_papers/working_papers/wp1/

² All 6 members of the Sixpence Board of Trustees are Governor-appointed and include: (1) the CEO of NDHHS; (2) the Commissioner of NDE; (3) an early childhood specialist representing an urban area of the state with a large concentration of poverty; (4) an early childhood specialist representing a rural area of the state with a large concentration of poverty; and (5-6) two representatives of the private investors.

It will also give child care providers access to more financial and non-financial resources for the quality environments they provide.

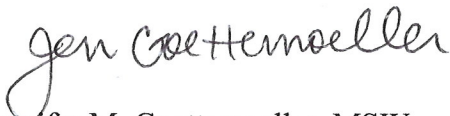
In addition to utilizing a public-private mechanism that allows public funds to reach further and have better impact than they would on their own, LB489 maximizes the efficient use of resources outside of the TEEOSA formula. Sixpence grants are available to all communities, whether their school districts are equalized or not.

Finally, it is important to note that LB489 works in tandem with LB547, which allocates federal funds (with no state impact) to Sixpence to fund partnerships made allowable by LB489. An amendment to LB547 also allocates federal funds (with no state impact) to the *Step Up to Quality* system for incentives and supports that child care providers will need as a result of their participation in *Step Up to Quality*. While we do not agree with the assumptions and calculations HHS has used to write their fiscal note on LB489, the amended LB547 will allocate \$1.2 million to *Step Up to Quality* to pay for any expenses HHS will incur due to the fact that LB489 requires child care provider participation in *Step Up to Quality*. Thus, **only federal funds** and **no state funds**, are needed for LBs 489 and 547.

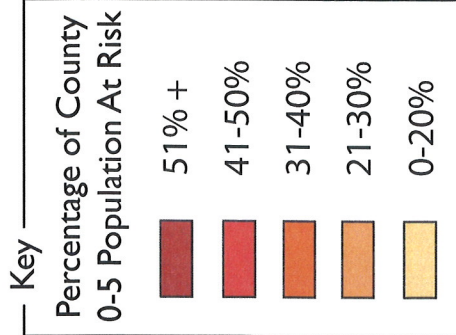
LB489 builds on the previous work of the Education Committee and the Nebraska Legislature to partner with the private sector on effective and accountable early childhood investments. This legislation also equips communities with the tools and flexibility needed to provide young, most at-risk children with early experiences that close the achievement gap before kindergarten *with no fiscal impact to the State*.

LB489 is wise public policy, and we urge your approval and advancement from committee.

Thank you,



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U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table B17024; generated by First Five Nebraska; using American Factfinder; <<http://factfinder2.census.gov>>; (4 December 2014).

153,612
Number of
Children Age 0-5
in Nebraska

64,427 (42%)