

5 February 2014

Senator Heath Mello, Chair
Members of the Appropriations Committee
Nebraska Unicameral Legislature

RE: LB 944

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Jen Goettemoeller and I am here on behalf of First Five Nebraska to urge your support of LB944 and its inclusion into our state budget.

As Senator Bolz mentioned, this bill increases the grant dollars available to Nurturing Healthy Behaviors. Nurturing Healthy Behaviors currently offers grants to private organizations that provide social and emotional development training and support to childcare providers and parents.

I think it may be helpful to clarify what social and emotional development is, and how it impacts a child. When you hear the term "social emotional development," it's referring to the development of those soft skills that many of us take for granted in our everyday lives.

"We prepare dinner while simultaneously helping our children with their homework and making notes about appointments we need to schedule for the week. We focus on our jobs when we need to and our families when they need us. We remember the phone number that our neighbor just gave us so we can write it down as soon as we find a pen. We take a deep breath, rather than honk, if the car in front of us fails to move immediately when the light turns green. As adults, our capacities to multitask, to display self-control, to follow multiple-step directions even when interrupted, and to stay focused on what we are doing despite ever-present distractions are what undergird the deliberate, intentional, goal-directed behavior that is required for daily life and success at work. And while there are cognitive limits to anyone's ability to multi-task effectively, we need and rely on these basic skills in all areas of our lives. Without them, we could not solve complicated problems and make decisions, persist at tedious but important tasks, make plans and adjust them when necessary, recognize and correct mistakes, control our impulsive behavior, or set goals and monitor our progress toward meeting them. Children need to develop these skills, too, in order to meet the many challenges they will face on the road to becoming productive, contributing members of their communities."¹

When these skills aren't developed, behavior becomes difficult, and then destructive.

¹ Building the Brain's "Air Traffic Control" System: How Early Experiences Shape the Development of Executive Function. Working paper #11. Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University.

These social emotional skills are the skills needed to succeed in school, make good life choices and build healthy relationships. Specifically, these skills include things like good self-esteem, self-control and the capacity to communicate. To be clear, these are the skills children need to interact well with others on the playground. Or when presented with a difficult math problem, these are the skills that provide children the capacity to keep trying until they succeed. Or in the third grade, these are the skills that will help children focus and apply a principle they learned in a different class to get good test scores. And they are the same skills that lead to success in the workplace later in life.

So the question is: how are these skills developed? I believe others who are here to testify today will speak more to what happens in child care and in the classroom setting, but basically, these skills are developed by good interactions with the child, by appropriately responding to the child's behavior, and helping the child identify their feelings, feel understood, and coaching them through appropriate behaviors when their first impulse is to lash out.

Now it sounds simple, and perhaps intuitive. **As essential as they are, we aren't born with the skills that enable us to control impulses, make plans, and stay focused.** Someone has to teach us those things – and we better learn them early. Our news is littered with stories every day about juveniles or adults who didn't learn those skills as a young child.

So then the question becomes: isn't that the parents job to teach them? Of course it is. While it is not the role of government to take over the job of parents, it is important for government to create conditions where good parenting can occur — especially when the children are at-risk. There are a lot of parents out there who do not know how to respond to their child's challenging behavior. That is where Nurturing Healthy Behaviors steps in. Parents, child care providers, and teachers can call for help, but what they get is much more than advice on the phone. They get training and hands-on coaching. Mental health consultants support children by providing parents and teachers with specific strategies to build social-emotional competencies. And they get results. Parent and teacher evaluation results show that children demonstrated significant improvement in many skill areas, as well as significant decreases in challenging behavior.

Should Nebraska taxpayers be making this investment? We think so. Making strategic investments based on proven outcomes is not only wise, it saves taxpayer dollars. Investments like LB944 alter the trajectory of children who would otherwise drain public resources in other systems later in life. LB944 isn't a band-aid approach. It's prevention. It's a strategic move to help parents (and caregivers) be better in their roles.

LB944 prioritizes funding for areas of the state with high numbers of at-risk children. I have submitted to you today a map. This is a map of the number of children from birth through age 5 who are at-risk of failing in school. These numbers come from the Census Bureau, and they are conservatively based on the NDE definition of at-risk of failing in school. The numbers are current through 2012, the most current year for which this data

is available. As you look it over and find the counties that are in your legislative district, also take a look at the statewide numbers. Currently 41% of Nebraska children are at-risk of failing in school. While that number alone is staggering, it is even more alarming to know that number is increasing. In 2010, that number was 39%. LB944 is a good investment of taxpayer dollars. It prioritizes at-risk children, and it teaches the adults in these children's lives the skills to respond most effectively. It's those adults, then, that can nurture the children in their lives and foster the child's skills to succeed in school, make good life choices, and build healthy relationships. These types of investments in young children yield tremendous returns, returns that are amplified when the investments are targeted to at-risk children.

Please include this modest increase for Nurturing Healthy Behaviors in your budget.

Thank you,

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

Jen Goettemoeller
Senior Policy Associate