

4 February 2014

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

RE: LB 984

Madam Chair and members of the Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon, and for your service fostering the educational success of Nebraska's children. We share your strong commitment to the educational needs of Nebraska's children. We also thank you for your continued recognition of the importance of early childhood education and the critical role it plays in a child's K-12 experience.

Day by day, we are expected to assimilate information, cultivate skills, and make appropriate decisions about how to function productively as members of our families, as workers, and as citizens. However, the ability to learn and function efficiently & productively is not something that just begins when a child enters kindergarten and grade school. Our capacity for personal, professional, and civic competence is built upon a neurological foundation that begins to take shape even before a child is born and is largely in place by five years of age. The quality of a child's earliest experiences, interactions, and relationships is physically written into the neural architecture of the developing brain in the first five years. The strength of that architecture is what makes growth and the acquisition of a lifetime's worth of skills possible.

LB 984, before you today, includes a \$4.6 million appropriation to the Nebraska Department of Education's preschool grant program. This allocation will go to the existing preschool program at the department that has quality standards built in to help schools continue to provide the kind of early childhood experiences that actually close the achievement gap for children at risk of failing in school.

In addition to quality standards, the Department's preschool program is successful because it encourages parent engagement. We know that the best high quality early childhood programs involve parents from the beginning. Not only is the parent a child's first and most important teacher, but setting the standard of parent involvement in the early years means a better chance that parents will continue to be involved once their children enter the K-12 system.

You have a map in front of you that looks similar to one you may have seen before. It shows that over 62,000 Nebraska children ages 0-5 are at risk of failing in school. That's

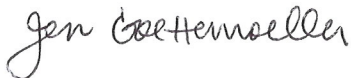
41% of all children who have yet to enter kindergarten. About 6 weeks ago, the Census Bureau released these new numbers that show the situation – especially in rural Nebraska – needs serious attention. The trend has been growing in the wrong direction for at least 14 years, but the good news is you are considering a bill that will directly address this problem. The vast majority of the Department's preschool grant funds go to programs in rural Nebraska.

In addition, we support allowing lottery allocations for early childhood – both for the Early Childhood Endowment (commonly known as Sixpence) and for the preschool grant program – to remain in place after June 2016. Stable funding for early childhood will allow school districts to provide robust, high-quality opportunities that close the achievement gap for children at risk who would otherwise struggle and need increased resources in the K-12 system.

LB 984 is sound and responsible public policy, and you're not going to get a better return on investment than investing in high quality early childhood programs.

Please advance LB 984 from Committee.

Thank you,

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

Jen Goettemoeller
Senior Policy Associate