



Early Childhood Highlights from the 104th Nebraska Legislature

Second Session, 2016

The 104th Legislature, Second Session, saw camaraderie, conflict and a record number of cloture votes. Amid the turmoil and divisiveness, bipartisan support for early childhood remained strong during the out-budget year.

A total of 391 bills were carried over from last session and 445 new bills were introduced; 216 bills were passed by the Legislature with 214 set to become law after taking into account vetoes by the Governor. Even with significant hours spent on filibusters, Speaker Galen Hadley was able to ensure that 44 of 49 senator priority bills were debated by the full Legislature.

Every year, First Five Nebraska closely monitors new and returning bills affecting the early learning and development of our state's youngest children, and tracks their progress as they move through the legislative process. A comprehensive list of these bills is online at FirstFiveNebraska.org. Those of greatest importance to the development of young children are summarized in this legislative overview, also available as a printable download.

Eleven term-limited senators deserve a great deal of thanks from all Nebraskans. Our deep appreciation goes out to Speaker Hadley and Senators Dave Bloomfield, Kathy Campbell, Colby Coash, Tanya Cook, Mike Gloor, Ken Haar, Beau McCoy, Heath Mello, Ken Schilz and Kate Sullivan. Watch for parting words from many of them in First Five Nebraska guest blogs in the coming months.

As our election year gets into full swing, remember to urge candidates to support strategic, fiscally accountable investments in quality early learning opportunities that close the achievement gap for children at risk. We still have much to do, and I hope you will join us in the year ahead as we continue our work of changing public policy by changing the public conversation for Nebraska's youngest children.

Jen Goettemoeller
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“It was the first year I was in the Legislature... I walked out of there [a presentation by Harvard University's Dr. Jack Shonkoff] shaking my head because I had never really thought about early childhood education.

We got such a lesson on the importance of why we, as a Legislature and a state, need to put our efforts into early childhood. And from that day forward, I tell people that was the most important lecture, I've been to in eight years at the Legislature.”

*Speaker Galen Hadley
Legislative District 37*

*Introductory remarks from the
“Nebraskans Speak About Early
Childhood Care and Education”
event announcing the results
of the Buffett Institute/Gallup
statewide early childhood survey,
3/29/16*

LB773: Early Childhood Workforce Development Task Force

In recent years, Nebraska's public and private sectors have pursued targeted, collaborative investments in the early learning and development of young children at risk as a strategy to contain remediation expenditures later in K-12 and other public systems, and strengthen the state's talent pipeline at its source. While these locally controlled, fiscally accountable investments have been effective, they still only reach less than 30% of our youngest children at risk, largely because Nebraska lacks enough skilled early childhood professionals to deliver high-quality early learning and development opportunities statewide.

LB773 grew out of cross-sector interest in a collaborative framework to analyze Nebraska's early childhood workforce challenge and recommend feasible strategies to address it. The legislation proposed the establishment of a task force representing higher education, public schools, state government, the child care community and business leaders. This group of stakeholders would be tasked with developing a report for the Nebraska Legislature outlining the state's current early childhood workforce needs, the professional competencies and program environments required to close the achievement gap and potential approaches for attracting, training and retaining more talented individuals in the field of early learning and development.

Although LB773 generated widespread support and ongoing interest, the introduction of Governor Ricketts' Education and Workforce (EdW) Roundtable in February opened new opportunities to link early learning to broader efforts in building the state's talent pipeline. Senator John Stinner and the various partners who collaborated on the legislation made the strategic decision to refrain from advancing the bill out of committee to work more collaboratively with the Governor's new initiative.

Additional information can be found on [First Five Nebraska's blog](#).

[First Five Nebraska's written testimony on LB773.](#)

“Brain development begins at [the] early stages of a child's life and if a child is behind before entering kindergarten, it is likely they will remain behind, or else have to catch up with [other] children later on, and that takes considerable resources. When it comes to funding education, I'd rather pay less at the front end than to have to bear the cost of remediation later.”

*Senator John Stinner
Legislative District 48*

*Introductory comments on LB773 to
the Education Committee, 2/19/16*

LB889: School Readiness Tax Credit Act

The School Readiness Tax Credit Act invests state dollars into closing the achievement gap before children enter the K-12 system. LB889, as amended and signed by the Governor, will help existing quality programs stabilize their budget, allowing them to serve more children at risk of failing in school. It also presents both programs and individuals in the early childhood field the opportunity to increase their effectiveness at closing the achievement gap by incentivizing professional development. The Act offers two tax credits: (1) a non-refundable credit for programs that serve children at risk and offer the level of quality known to close the achievement gap, and (2) a refundable credit for individuals working in the early childhood field.

These credits will be available beginning in 2017. The bill passed 42-5 on Day 58 of the 60-day session. It was presented to the Governor on April 12 and received his signature on April 18.

[First Five Nebraska's written testimony on LB889.](#)

LB939: Outcome Measurements for Home Visiting Programs

LB939 defines and allows for rules and regulations requiring outcome measurements for home visiting programs. The bill also requires departments that administer home visiting programs to submit an outcome measurement plan to the Governor and Clerk of the Legislature by January 1, 2017, and every five years after.

LB939 was heard by the Health and Human Services Committee, but was not advanced.

LB956: Budget Bill

During out-budget years, the budget bill typically includes minor adjustments in spending. LB956, introduced by Speaker Galen Hadley at the request of the Governor, included stable funding for high-quality early childhood investments in Sixpence and the Nebraska Department of Education preschool grant program.

[Learn more about the budget process.](#)

“The lack of skilled workers for the jobs of tomorrow is a major cross-cutting issue of concern to our state’s employers. And if we don’t have enough quality early childhood professionals to reach today’s kids, we are unlikely to improve that situation because research shows that if kids are not prepared to start kindergarten, they will start behind and most likely stay behind.”

Joseph Young
Executive Vice-President, Nebraska
Chamber of Commerce & Industry

*Testimony to the Education
Committee, 2/19/16*

LB1066: Nebraska Department of Education Technical Bill

The Nebraska Department of Education’s annual technical bill includes a slight change to *Step Up to Quality* provisions so “minor corrective action” items will not negatively affect the quality ratings already earned by participating early childhood providers. The bill also changes lump-sum payments to school districts and permits the State Board of Education to select additional assessment instruments for statewide assessments.

LB1066 passed on Final Reading 44-5 and was signed by the Governor on April 13.

LB1067: Learning Community

LB1067 repeals the 95-cent common levy and 2-cent special building fund levy for the 11 school districts in Douglas and Sarpy counties that make up the Learning Community. While the bill preserves the structure of the Learning Community, it requires individual districts to fund educational services out of their own property tax revenues, but preserves the 2-cent levy currently earmarked for early childhood education. To offset the loss of pooled educational funding in certain communities, the bill increases the amount of state aid for school districts with a high percentage of students in poverty and phases in transition aid over two years. In the closing days of the session, the Governor line-item vetoed these funds reducing the total amount appropriated by \$4 million.

Under the bill, the Learning Community will create a plan to address achievement equity and barriers to achievement such as poverty, mobility and truancy. Districts will be eligible for additional state aid after the State Board of Education approves the plans. Multidistrict educational service units also may create achievement plans to qualify for the additional aid.

Senators voted 40-7 to pass LB1067. The bill was presented to the Governor on April 13 and received his signature on April 19.

[Unicameral Update on LB1067.](#)