



February 5, 2024

Senator Dave Murman, Chairman  
Members of the Education Committee  
Nebraska Legislature

RE: LB997

Chairman Murman and Members of the Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Mitchell Clark, and I am a Policy Advisor for First Five Nebraska, a statewide public policy organization invested in the care, early learning and well-being of Nebraska's youngest children. I am here today to testify in support of LB997 and would like to thank Senator Ibach for her leadership in advocating for the early childhood profession and for introducing this important legislation.

Nebraska needs a well-compensated, highly skilled early childhood workforce to support our working parents. Without these educators, child care programs will close, forcing parents to find alternative care options for their children. Nebraska cannot afford this. In our state, 74% of children under age 6 have both parents in the workforce, ranking our state as the 7<sup>th</sup> in the country behind the District of Columbia, Vermont, Minnesota, Iowa, South Dakota and Massachusetts. Despite the critical need for child care, the people who provide this important service remain some of the lowest paid individuals in Nebraska.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2022, child care workers earned a median hourly wage of \$13.34 in Nebraska, compared with \$21.20 for all other occupations. Not surprisingly, from 2018 to 2022, there was an 11% decrease in child care workers. Clearly, low compensation and few opportunities for career advancement means even the most dedicated early childhood educators are leaving the field for better economic opportunities.

The quality of early care and education is directly linked to teacher training and education, as well as compensation. In Nebraska, many educators would like the opportunity to build skills to improve the quality of their care. However, taking time away from work and losing pay is often a barrier to increased education and training. The WAGE\$ program addresses this issue by providing supplements to educators' income while they work toward career advancement. In an industry with a 30% turnover rate, only 9% of WAGE\$ participants left their programs. This statistic is impressive and shows just how much this program is needed.

WAGE\$ focuses on the outcomes of increased retention, compensation and education for the early childhood workforce. It has a proven track record, and an additional \$2 million investment would help this program serve more educators. Again, thank you Senator Ibach for introducing this important legislation and I urge the committee to move this bill to General File. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mitchell Clark".

Mitchell Clark  
Policy Advisor  
First Five Nebraska