



February 10, 2025

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

RE: LB161

Chairman Murman and Members of the Education Committee,

My name is Jen Goettemoeller Wendl and I am a contract lobbyist for First Five Nebraska, a statewide public policy organization focused on supporting policies that promote the early care and education of our state's youngest children. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of LB161. Thanks also to Senator Juarez for pursuing policies that support our youngest learners.

We have all heard how important it is for young children to have stimulating interactions. Quality early childhood experiences are those in which children are physically safe and emotionally supported through frequent, warm, one-on-one interactions with caring adults who engage them in language-rich and educational activities.

These interactions literally build the foundation for cognitive, emotional and social skills that help children succeed now and in the future. It's not flash cards or learning our ABCs. It's not learning how to count in correct sequences or knowing how to write your name before you get to kindergarten. Developing self-awareness, the confidence to explore, listening skills and phonological awareness...the foundation for these skills and many more are all built through interactions. Those interactions don't start in kindergarten.

Let me give you a quick analogy for understanding how our brains are built. Think of a tennis court. One player hits the ball to the other side of the net. The player on the opposite side of the court hits the ball back to the other side. It's "serve and return," right? This same "serve and return" concept is literally how our brains are built. It happens very young. Think of a baby. Even before they are able to speak, their family and caregivers engage in "serve and return" interactions with them. Whenever the baby smiles, they hit the tennis ball to the other side of the court. When someone smiles back, they hit the ball back to the baby. Then the baby babbles, hitting the ball back. And mom and dad reply with words, "Look how big you are," hitting the ball to the baby's side. Every time the interaction is reciprocated, the very architecture of our brain gets stronger. The more interactions we have like that before we are 5 years old, the more brain architecture goes from being like a dirt road to a gravel road to a paved road to a highway to a super highway.

These “serve and return” interactions can *and should* happen in all types of environments, no matter where children are: at home with a parent or grandparent, in a small child care setting run in someone’s home, in a child care center, in a school-based preschool program. What’s important is that we make sure the **policies and systems** are in place so that no matter which environment parents choose, their child receives good “serve and return” interactions that build brain architecture.

LB161 would solidify an important piece of that system. Frankly, our education funding practices should reflect what we know about child development. Our current funding system allows schools to weight their K-12 students at 100% of membership, while our youngest learners—at the very time the entire foundation for all future learning is being set—are only weighted at 60%. Senators, with all due respect, we have it backwards. We should invest more upfront when the foundation is being set, during the time we can have life-changing impact. LB161 changes the TEEOSA formula to weight early childhood students at 100% of membership instead of 60%.

In 2005, when the Legislature passed LB577 granting authority for early childhood students to be included in a school’s student count for the purposes of state aid (if certain accountability requirements were met), 70% of school districts were equalized. That number has flipped and now about 70% of school districts are non-equalized. Why does that matter? Because early childhood funding in TEEOSA is distributed **only to districts that are equalized**. However, all schools need to be able to provide those “serve and return” interactions for preschoolers, regardless of equalization status. **In addition to adjusting the early childhood student weight to 1.0 (up from 0.6), we need to allow all schools to receive their early childhood calculated state aid.** That would allow every school district to benefit from LB161.

LB161 is a good first step. First Five Nebraska urges you to advance it and invest early when the foundation for all future learning is being set, where we get our best return on investment.

Thank you,



Jennifer M. Goettemoeller Wendl, MSW
Prairie Oak Publishing & Consulting
5230 Grace Lane
Lincoln, NE 68527
(402) 617-0911