

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office

Education Committee January 18, 2022

Rough Draft

WALZ: Welcome to the Education Committee public hearing. My name is Lynne Walz from Legislative District 15. I serve as the Chair of the committee. The committee will take up the bills in the order on the posted agenda. Our hearing today is your public part of the legislative process. This is your opportunity to express your position on the proposed legislation before us today. To better facilitate today's proceeding, I ask that you abide by the following procedures. Please turn off or silence cell phones or other, other electronic devices. The order of testimony is introducer, proponents, opponents, neutral, and then closing remarks. If you will be test-- if you will be testifying, please complete the green testifier sheet and hand to the committee clerk when you come up to testify. If you have written materials that you would like distributed to the committee, please hand them to the page to distribute. We need ten copies for all committee members and staff. If you need additional copies, please ask the page to make copies for you now. When you begin to testify, state and spell your name for the record. Please speak directly into the microphone so our transcribers are able to hear your testimony clearly. If you are not testifying in person and would like to submit a written comment to be included in the official hearing record as an exhibit, you will be-- you will find the required length on the bill page of the Nebraska Legislator-- Legislature's website. Comments are allowed once a bill has been scheduled, scheduled for public hearings and must be submitted and verified prior to 12 p.m. on the last workday prior to the public hearing to be included in the official hearing record. The comments submitted online and verified prior to the deadline identified as comments for public hearing records will only-- will be the only method for submission of official hearing record comments other than testifying in person. Letters and comments submitted via email or hand-delivered will no longer be included as part of the hearing record, although they are a viable option for communicating your views with an individual senator. Finally, please be concise. Testimony will be limited to five minutes. We will be using the light system. Green, your time has begun and you may begin speaking. Yellow, you have one minute remaining and you'll wrap up your comments when you see the red light. The committee members with us today will introduce themselves beginning at my far right.

McKINNEY: Good afternoon. Senator Terrell McKinney, District 11, north Omaha.

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MURMAN: Hello. Senator Dave Murman, District 38, seven whole counties and part of an eighth in the southern part of Nebraska, central part of the state.

MORFELD: Adam, Adam Morfeld, District 46, northeast Lincoln and now a little bit of central Lincoln.

LINEHAN: Good afternoon. Lou Ann Linehan, District 39, Elkhorn and Waterloo.

SANDERS: Good afternoon. Rita Sanders representing District 45, which is Bellevue and eastern Sarpy County.

DAY: Good afternoon. Jen Day. I represent Legislative District 49, which is north-central Sarpy County, including the areas of Gretna, Millard, and Papillion La Vista.

WALZ: All right and--

PANSING BROOKS: Hi. I'm State Senator Patty Pansing Brooks representing Legislative District 28 right here in the heart of Lincoln.

WALZ: To my immediate right is research analyst Nicole Barrett and to the right end of the table is committee clerk Noah Boger. And because it was the first day of committee hearings, Noah wore a special tie. It's a pencil, [INAUDIBLE] pencil. Our pages are Bhagya Pushkaran-- all right-- and Aleks Glowik. Please remember that senators may come and go during our hearing as they may have bills to introduce in other committees. I'd also like to remind our committee members to speak directly into the microphones and limit side conversations. We are an electronics-equipped committee and the information is provided electronically as well as in paper form. Therefore, you may see committee members referencing information on their electronic devices. Please be assured that your presence here today and your testimony are important to us and crucial to our state government. And with that, we will open with LB-- where is it?

NICOLE BARRETT: [INAUDIBLE]

WALZ: Oh, LB754.

BOSTAR: Good afternoon.

WALZ: Good afternoon.

BOSTAR: Good afternoon, Chairwoman Walz and members of the Education Committee. I'm Senator Eliot Bostar. That's E-l-i-o-t B-o-s-t-a-r. I represent Legislative District 29. I'm here to present LB754, a bill to extend the timeline of a study created by LB630, which passed last session to include the 2023-24 school year. To refresh your memory, LB630 tasked the Nebraska Department of Education in consultation with the University of Nebraska to develop and implement a pilot program to study the efficacy of commercial air filters in classrooms and their impact on academic and behavioral performance across the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years. LB630 passed on Final Reading, 44-2, last session and was signed into law by the Governor on May 25, 2021. Due to the global supply chain problems impacting many industries across our nation this year, the University of Nebraska researchers conducting the study were unable to obtain a sufficient number of air filters prior to the beginning of the 2021-22 school year. LB754 simply extends a timeline of the study to include the 2023-24 school year in order to assure a full two school years of data collection. The adjustment of the timeline has no fiscal impact and has been requested by the University of Nebraska researchers in order to ensure a scientifically significant dataset for the results of the study. Given the potential impact that cleaner air can have on our educational environments and given what a simple adjustment LB754 creates as well as the support the Nebraska Legislature has already shown this project, it would be a missed opportunity not to give the researchers conducting the study the opportunity to do so with a sufficient amount of time to be scientifically significant. I would encourage you to support LB754. Thank you again for your time. I'd be happy to answer any questions.

WALZ: Thank you. Questions from the committee? Senator Linehan.

LINEHAN: Would this-- are all schools public and private? Is this available to all schools so they can pick from different schools, right?

BOSTAR: Yes, Senator. The pilot program is-- involves both private and public schools. For example, the, the Catholic schools are working with the department now on making sure that there is integration for the pilot program so that all schools are participating.

LINEHAN: OK. Thank you very much for being here and thanks for bringing the bill.

BOSTAR: Thank you.

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WALZ: Thanks. Any other questions? Senator Sanders.

SANDERS: Thank you, Senator. Senator Bostar, do you think you'll need another extension-- if, if those pilot programs don't have students in the school because of the COVID issue, do you think you'll need another year in addition to this?

BOSTAR: I think that's a-- absolutely a fair question. The bill was brought to me by the researchers and based on the conversations we've been having, without speaking directly for them, my impression is that they feel that this would be sufficient to ensure that the pilot program and the study is conducted in a meaningful way.

SANDERS: Thank you.

BOSTAR: Thank you.

WALZ: Any other questions? I see none. Thank you.

BOSTAR: Thank you.

WALZ: Are there any proponents? Opponents? Anybody who would like to speak in the neutral? Waive his closing, so that ends our hearing on LB754.

BOSTAR: Thank you.

WALZ: Thank you, Senator Bostar. And we will open our hearing on LB758. Senator Brandt.

BRANDT: Good afternoon, Chairman Walz and members of the Education Committee. I am Senator Tom Brandt, T-o-m B-r-a-n-d-t. I represent Legislative District 32: Fillmore, Thayer, Jefferson, Saline, and southwestern Lancaster Counties. Today I'm introducing LB758, a bill to include early childhood programs in the current farm-to-school program. Last year, I introduced and the Legislature passed LB396, which was a bill that expanded the scale and reach of Nebraska-produced food by creating a statewide farm-to-school program administered by the Nebraska Department of Education with the cooperation of the Nebraska Department of Agriculture. The bill created a full-time position at the Department of Education to administer the program and provide networking resources for schools, vegetable and fruit growers, dry bean, grain, meat, egg, and dairy producers in Nebraska to increase the quantity of quality local food served in our school cafeterias. That bill passed unanimously from

this committee, became a Speaker priority, and passed unanimously on the floor. After the bill became law, a few folks reached out to the Department of Education to ensure that early childhood programs would be included and unfortunately, the language that we passed last year was too restrictive that the assistance could only be offered to elementary and secondary schools. LB758 corrects this oversight and adds a definition of early childhood education programs to the farm-to-school program. With the reference to Statute 79-1101 on page 2, line 6 of the bill, it adds a description of an early childhood education program to be "any prekindergarten part-day or full-day program or in-home family support program." Farm to school has immense support across the state. Today, you will hear from Sarah Smith, who is the statewide farm-to school network coordinator at Nebraska Department of Education. She can give you an update on how farm to school is working in Nebraska and expound upon the need to include early childhood education in the statewide network, as well as from other proponents. It is not my intention to exclude these programs in the original bill and I would, I would appreciate the committee's support to add them to the farm-to-school program. And with that, I would be happy to answer any questions.

WALZ: Thank you, Senator Brandt. Questions from the committee? Senator Day.

DAY: Thank you, Senator Walz, and thank you. I love-- I loved LB396 last year and I'm excited to see you expanding it to early, early childhood programs. But this would only apply to early childhood programs that are run through a school, not standalone early childhood centers, correct, or what's the--

BRANDT: Sure and Senator Day, that was my exact question. And to read verbatim from the statute, it says, "early childhood education program means any prekindergarten part-day or full-day program or in-home family support program with a stated purpose of promoting social, emotional, intellectual, language, physical, and aesthetic development and learning for children from birth to kindergarten-entrance, age and family development and support."

DAY: OK, so it's not just pre-K programs run in the schools. We're-- OK., we're--

BRANDT: That's the intention.

DAY: --still working through that or-- OK.

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BRANDT: Yeah, that's, that's the intention and I guess I would-- I'm anxious to hear from Sarah Smith to see--

DAY: OK.

BRANDT: --how it's working and, and what their interpretation of that would be. But this, this to me, looks like it could open it up to maybe a few, few places outside of the schools.

DAY: OK, wonderful. Thank you.

BRANDT: Yep.

WALZ: Any other questions? I see none. Thank you.

BRANDT: All right, thank you.

WALZ: Proponents.

SARAH SMITH: Hi. Good afternoon, Chairman Walz and members of the Education Committee. My name is Sarah Smith, S-a-r-a-h S-m-i-t-h. I am the farm-to-school specialist at the Nebraska Department of Education. Many thanks to Senator Brandt for introducing LB758, which will strengthen the Nebraska Farm-to-School Program Act. With the passage of LB396 last year, the Nebraska Farm-to-School Act is providing significant added support that collaboratively is building farm-to-school activity in the state. However, inadvertently, the bill did omit early childhood education from the prescribed services. In 2017, NDE held a Nebraska farm-to-preschool survey and we distributed it to early childhood education providers across the state. Data did come back and show us that only 20 percent of our early care facilities were conducting farm-to-preschool education activities, yet 67 percent of these sites want curriculum resources that are integrating farm-to-preschool activities into their programs. So farm to preschool does align with our current Nebraska education models and those learning styles that support the needs of young children. The NDE has actively pursued farm-to-preschool leadership in our state and does provide providers support in their efforts to offer farm to preschool. The Nebraska Farm-to-School Act did set the stage for stakeholders to strategically work together in pursuit of a more robust and comprehensive farm-to-school program statewide under the leadership of a coordinator housed within the NDE. The Nebraska Department of Education has made progress since establishment of this act, which includes engaging in plans with farm-to-school leaders across the state to develop a statewide network. And in January of

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this year, just last week, the NDE submitted a proposal for 2022 USDA farm-to-school grant funds that would support cross-collaborative network planning and development. The Nebraska Department of Education has supported schools and communities through many and major supply chain challenges and shortages, hosting our first ever Nebraska market meetup for producers and schools where they were able to share, learn, and innovate around the topics of local food supply and access. That market meetup facilitated connections and purchasing relationships. Additionally, the Nebraska Department of Education is growing existing programs that support schools and early care and education facilities and sourcing local foods year-round like Nebraska Harvest of the Month and Nebraska Thursdays. These programs are expanding to include more featured local products, bolstering classroom and cafeteria activity, and providing technical resources and assistance for culinary skills and recipe development. And finally, the NDE is prioritizing education for schools and providers and producers by planning and implementing a producer training called Bringing the Farm to School. And it's meant specifically for growers in our state, although-- and we're doing that in partnership with several nonprofits and university partners. This extensive training will benefit not only our producers working with K-12 organizations, but could also benefit early childhood education programs. The training will be offered across the state to urban, rural, and tribal communities starting late this winter. So finally, there is potential to have lifelong impact on our communities when leveraging farm to school and farm to preschool is a pathway to advance equity. And that includes food access and security. Inclusion of these opportunities for our littlest eaters is, is critical. LB758 assures that efforts can be coordinated and increases the capacity of our state to advance in farm-to-school activity with collective action. Nebraska can lead the nation in community health and well-being, celebrating our agricultural heritage and cultural diversity with farm to school and early care and education as the vehicle.

WALZ: All right, thank you.

SARAH SMITH: Yes.

WALZ: Questions from the committee? Senator Murman.

MURMAN: Thank you for testifying. I'm just curious, is FFA and 4-H involved with the-- I think you might have mentioned it in your testimony, but in, in bringing these local produce to the schools?

SARAH SMITH: Yes, absolutely. Yeah, they're considered really aligned with farm to school as part of that education component. And as far as that procurement and bringing the food to the communities or to the school, learning how to grow that food, that's growing exponentially with FFA and agriculture education teachers right now. There's great interest in standardizing curriculum that would make that happen and ag teachers are, are looking for ways to integrate it. Their students are interested in it too, so that's-- they're definitely a part of the, the growth of a network and collaboration.

MURMAN: Great, thank you.

SARAH SMITH: Yep.

WALZ: Thank you. Other questions? Senator Day.

DAY: Thank you, Senator Walz and thank you for being here to testify today. So I'll ask you the same question that I asked Senator Brandt. What is your interpretation of early childhood programs? Would that include standalone early childhood centers or is this-- does this only apply to public and nonpublic schools that have early childhood programs?

SARAH SMITH: Thank you for asking. I think I know the answer to that, but I also think that there are folks that have that definition-- the definition where they're going to be the expert in responding to that, so--

DAY: OK, yeah.

SARAH SMITH: --if that's OK. I can report back or see if they can--

DAY: Absolutely.

SARAH SMITH: --answer that question.

DAY: Yeah, I'm just curious. Yeah, thank you.

SARAH SMITH: Yep.

WALZ: Other questions from the committee? I have one.

SARAH SMITH: OK.

WALZ: You talked a lot about network planning. Can you give a couple of examples of what you mean by that?

SARAH SMITH: Sure, yeah. So rather than all these different entities that have an interest or expertise in agriculture or agriculture education or school gardens or gardening in community gardens, working within silos and trying to learn on their own what resources exist or how to fund it or how to build partnerships and teams, this network is a way to bring partners together or entities together, stakeholders together that can begin to partner and not be as siloed in their efforts. There's lots of good initiatives happening in the state, but there's not one entity and one formalized way that those entities are coming together to share out and learn from each other.

WALZ: All right, awesome. Thank you.

SARAH SMITH: Sure.

WALZ: Any other questions? I see none. Thank you so much. Next proponent.

MARCUS URBAN: Good afternoon. My name is Marcus Urban, M-a-r-c-u-s U-r-b-a-n, from Leigh, Nebraska. I am a former agriculture education instructor at Lindsay Holy Family and currently serve as the vice chair of education for the Nebraska Cattlemen. I am a cattle feeder, a farmer, and last but certainly not least, a father of a two-year-old. Today, I'm here to testify on behalf of, of seven agricultural organizations: Nebraska Cattlemen, Nebraska Farm Bureau, Nebraska Corn Growers, Nebraska State Dairy Association, Nebraska Pork Producers, Nebraska Soybean, and Nebraska Wheat in support of LB758. Thank you to Senator Brandt for supporting and encouraging the expansion of the Farm-to-School Act to also include pre-K students. Members of our respective organizations have invested significant volunteer hours and financial resources into various public outreach and farm-to-school type programs like Beef in Schools through the Nebraska Cattlemen and Nebraska Cattlemen, Ag in the Classroom through the Nebraska Farm Bureau, and CommonGround through corn and soybean organizations. The core goal of these efforts is meant to enhance the relationship between local farmers and ranchers and students in their community schools. This is also an opportunity for farmers and ranchers to give back to the community by promoting locally raised and locally processed foods through school lunch programs. As a former agriculture educator, I know farm-to-school curriculum opportunities are endless. When you're able to connect the food a student needs to the people who raise it, you're able to build connections beyond the school classroom walls. It remains one of the most impactful ways our industry can advocate for itself. Expanding this experience into pre-K curriculum

encourages early childhood programs to introduce agriculture and its ties to food during some of the most vulnerable years of a student's education. In closing, I want to re-emphasize our gratitude to Senator Brandt for introducing this bill and encourage the Education Committee to advance LB758 so the Farm-to-School Act can expand its reach and impact. I'll happily take any questions.

WALZ: Thank you. Questions from the committee? I see none. Thanks so much. Next proponent.

SARA HOWARD: Oh, OK. It's my first time on this side of the, this side of the job. OK, so thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Sara Howard, spelled S-a-r-a H-o-w-a-r-d, and I'm a policy advisor at First Five Nebraska. First Five Nebraska is a statewide public policy organization focused on promoting quality early care and learning opportunities for Nebraska's youngest children. I'm here in support of LB758 to include early childhood programs into the farm-to-school program established last year. I want to thank Senator Brandt for introducing this bill. I'll go off script. You have my notes. I submitted them frantically on Friday thinking that was the deadline. When Senator Brandt said that folks reached out to the NDE to see if early childhood programs would be included in the farm-to-school program, those folks are me. I read the bill and I didn't-- I looked at it and if you look at the green copy of the bill on line 19, you can see the stricken language. The stricken language says elementary and secondary schools. And what that means is that if there was an early childhood program housed within a school, it would be included in the program and it could get the technical assistance. But then the NDE said because it was so prescriptive on schools, a standalone early childhood program would not be eligible for the technical assistance offered in the farm-to-school bill. So that's sort of the-- what we're trying to fix here. What you'll see is that-- and we worked with-- bless, bless legal counsel for the Education Committee. She was just lovely to work with. She sort of gave us some guidance around let's add some definitions because the original bill didn't have any definitions of what a school was or what an early childhood program was. If you look at 1101, which is the statutory sort of reference that we're going back to, that's the statutory reference that includes Sixpence, Head Start, and pre-K full day and part day and so for us, that means that we're going to capture these standalone early childhood programs. So originally, you guys were not going to hear from me in terms of testimony. I had two lovely childcare providers who were really excited to come and testify with you. It was their first time, they were very nervous, we had done some

Zooms to get them ready to go, and they actually-- one had COVID in her home and one caught COVID and so they were not able to be here with you today. So I want to highlight them because they were so excited and I want to make sure that you, you still hear their voices in this conversation. I included Meggan Messersmith's testimony in what I handed out to you, partially because she is from Red Cloud, Senator Murman's district. She's doing a lot of really lovely things at the Valley childcare, but also you just might need a bright spot. Those pictures of those kids at the edible schoolyard is just adorable and wonderful. And so what she's excited about is they've been focusing on how do they grow food and teach kids about growing their own food. But also now how do we work with local farmers and get that technical assistance to make sure they can come in and also work with the kids and teach them about the, the food that they can bring into their early childhood setting? The other person is Lindsey Jarecki, which you should have her, her letter for the record as well. She's from Boone County Beginnings up in Albion. And when they were initially fundraising for their early childhood center up in Boone County, their biggest donors were local agriculture and often the ag producers would say, is there any other way that I can help you? Could I give you an in-kind donation? Could I give you food? And they were like, we have no idea what the rules are around you giving us food. And so adding early childhood in would provide these providers with the technical assistance that they need to, to be able to address those regulatory hurdles and connect kids with that fresh food. So with that, I do sincerely want to thank Senator Brandt and his office. They were lovely to work with and legal counsel in the Education Committee was lovely to work with on this very small but important bill because I think we all know that early childhood is that key moment and ensuring that kids have access to healthy food at that important time in their lives is, is really critical. So I appreciate the committee's time and attention to LB758 and I'm happy to try to answer any questions you may have.

WALZ: Thank you. Questions from the committee? The pictures are great.

SARA HOWARD: Aren't they adorable?

WALZ: Yes, they are.

SARA HOWARD: They're just so cute.

WALZ: We need to pass them around.

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SARA HOWARD: Well, perfect, wonderful.

WALZ: Thank you.

SARA HOWARD: All right, have a great afternoon, you guys.

WALZ: Thank you. Next proponent.

RACHEL M. GIBSON: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Rachel Gibson, R-a-c-h-e-l M, Gibson, G-i-b-s-o-n, and I am the director of education policy for the League of Women Voters Nebraska. The league is a nonpartisan organization that encourages active and informed participation in government and that includes well-researched advocacy of policy, which is why we're here today. Thank you to the committee for taking the time to hear. Thank you, Chair Walz. And Senator Brandt, thank you so much for introducing, introducing this bill. I'm going to read our, our statement here and then add a little as a parent at the end. We support this program, the inclusion of early childhood education, for two primary reasons. First of all, the league has a long-standing history of supporting accessible and high-quality early childhood programs, which this would definitely add to. Second, the league has given more recent attention to agricultural policy and it has identified locally sourced food as a key component of that. In recent years, our league chapters have supported farm-to-school initiatives at the state level at some of our neighbors'-- regionally neighbor states of Minnesota and Illinois. This program being expanded to include early childhood would be wonderful for lots of reasons. We looked at some of the data from, from the past year and it had wide support from agricultural, educational, and environmental sectors previously, with no opposition in last year's committee hearing. It's also been an economic opportunity for local producers, school districts, and communities, and in the 2020-2021 year, had a \$1.6 million impact on the state and that was based on some data from the USDA. Expanding the program to include early childhood education programs will benefit children in the early years crucial to their development. It celebrates and shares Nebraska agricultural tradition and it economically supports the food producers in our state and it's for all those reasons that we as a league hope that it's moved forward to the floor for full debate. As a parent, not part of the league, with two little ones, I have a nine-year-old in garden club and him being able to come home and say, hey, we, we made salsa out of tomatoes and now he eats tomatoes is like a beautiful gift. So as a parent, this is a wonderful type of program that helps them connect that, so I thank you for that as a parent. And I will answer any

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questions if you have them. Otherwise, again, thank you to Senator Brandt for bringing this bill.

WALZ: Thank you. Questions from the committee? I see none. Thank you so much--

RACHEL M. GIBSON: Thank you very much.

WALZ: --for coming today. Other proponents.

COLBY COASH: Thank you, Chairwoman Walz, members of the Education Committee. My name is Colby Coash, C-o-l-b-y C-o-a-s-h. I represent the Association of School Boards and I'm here today because I missed the deadline to get the letter to all of you and I wanted to go on record. And my members and our legislative committee in particular was very adamant that we come in and be on record on this bill, primarily because 75 percent of our members are, are tied to the agriculture industry across the state and they're very interested in any type of program that connects that industry with education. And they were very happy to see the expansion that is in LB758 so that it could be expanded to early childhood and they wanted me to come and share that with you. I'll leave it at that.

WALZ: All right, thank you. Questions? I see none.

COLBY COASH: Thank you.

WALZ: Thanks for coming today. Any other proponents? Any opponents? Anyone who would like to speak in the neutral? Senator Brandt, would you like to close? While he's coming up, we did have submitted testimony from seven proponents and there were no opponents and no neutral.

BRANDT: Well, I think everybody can see that this is-- even in its first year is having a positive impact on the state. It's going to be really exciting three or four years down the road to see where the farm-to-school program in general is going. I guess I viewed this initially through the lens of my home school system, which is Tri County Schools. And I think Senator Murman, a lot of the rural senators, our whole school system is under one roof, the same cafeteria that cooks for the seniors cooks for the, for the kindergarten and then we've got a preschool there. Well, it only makes sense that the-- that in a lot of these consolidated school districts that everybody in the school gets-- is eligible for this program. But you can see there's going to be a much larger impact as we include

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childhood centers in other parts, so-- and we will, we will get back to you, Senator Day and the rest of the committee, on that to clarify that. So with that, if there's any questions?

WALZ: Any questions?

BRANDT: All right.

WALZ: I just have one--

BRANDT: OK.

WALZ: --and maybe you can answer it. I should have asked before, but she mentioned that there was a \$1.6 million impact.

BRANDT: Um-hum.

WALZ: Can you talk about that at all or--

BRANDT: That, that's actually the first time that, that I was made aware of that, so that's good that somebody was able to quantify that. I imagine that number will only grow, so. On the investment, I think last year, the state allocated \$100,000 to the Department of Education for this position and I can only envision this growing. Nebraska, depending on the years, either the second or third-largest ag economy in the nation and the reason it fluctuates is the price of fat cattle. That sort of goes between Nebraska and Texas. It only makes sense that the largest food restaurant in the state are our school cafeterias. We should be trying to source as much food from inside the state as we can because the numbers when we did the original bill were 90 percent of the food dollars in the state of Nebraska by the schools were going out of state. So if we can increase that any amount at all, it will have a huge impact on the state of Nebraska.

WALZ: Thank you, Senator Brandt. Any other questions?

BRANDT: All right, thank you.

WALZ: I-- yep, thank you. I forgot to read the submitted testimony from Jeremy Ekeler, Gary Dougherty, Marrienne Williams, Sara Howard, Lisa Guenther, Meggan Messersmith, and Lindsey Jarecki. Thank you. All right, that closes our hearing on LB758 and we will open on LB838 with Senator Kolterman.

KOLTERMAN: Good afternoon--

WALZ: Good afternoon.

KOLTERMAN: --Senator Walz. My name is Mark Kolterman, M-a-r-k K-o-l-t-e-r-m-a-n, and I represent the 24th Legislative District and I'm here today to introduce LB838. As we all know, the pandemic has devastated many industries and Nebraska's childcare industry has faced extreme challenges. Even before COVID-19, these small businesses operated on very thin margins and struggled with high turnover. Quarantines, room closures, and increased stress from providing care through the pandemic have exasperated these issues. Recent data shows that 7 percent of Nebraska childcare educators left the workforce in 2020-21. I want to repeat that. I think that's critical. Recent data shows that 7 percent in Nebraska childcare educators left the workforce in '20-21. This means that childcare providers are not operating at full capacity, making it more difficult for parents to access reliable childcare. This lack of reliable care has negative consequences for Nebraska's economy. Workforce shortages in the childcare industry are tied directly to workforce shortages for every other sector of our economy. A recent Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry study found that 54 percent of the 300 Nebraska business leaders surveyed ranked childcare as a top opportunity or challenge for economic recovery. High turnover in childcare staff is a challenge that faces us all and LB838 is an opportunity to address it in a serious way. LB838 directs the Nebraska Department of Education to create a program to provide additional financial aid to these critical workers. It is my intent that the aid that is provided under LB838 will assist early childhood care providers to join the Educators Health Alliance insurance pool to provide healthcare coverage to those-- to these providers. As you may know, the Educators Health Alliance is the largest insurance pool in the state of Nebraska, with more than 80,000 participants from all but four Nebraska school districts. Educators Health Alliance offers quality health insurance plans to support educators providing quality education for Nebraska's children. It only makes sense that early childhood educators working hard to set up-- set children up for success in school have-- also have access to this pool. I have been privileged-- in passing, I just want you to know I was privileged when I was on the Seward school board to serve on this Educators Health Alliance board of directors representing the school districts. And I will tell you that it's probably one of the best-run secrets in the state of Nebraska and they have a very quality education health insurance program. If you speak to early childhood programs across Nebraska, which are home-grown small businesses, you will hear that it is extremely common to have

their educators and employees leave their positions and go to work in other section-- sectors of the economy, particularly large brand-name businesses, because they offer insurance. The high turnover rates and difficulty attracting and keeping qual-- qualified educators is a problem for Nebraska's childcare businesses and it hurts Nebraska's economy. LB838 offers an opportunity to address this issue. First Five Nebraska has worked extensively with stakeholders such as the Nebraska Association of School Boards, who endorsed this program, the Nebraska Department of Education, who's crafting-- helped craft this legislation, and representatives from the school boards and First Five Nebraska will follow me to answer any technical questions you might have about the bill or the Educators Health Alliance. I'm here to try and answer any questions that I can, but there are some very qualified people following me that can help as well. So thank you and I hope you'll give serious consideration to supporting this bill and moving it to the floor.

WALZ: Thank you, Senator Kolterman. Questions from the committee? Senator Pansing Brooks.

PANSING BROOKS: Thank you, Senator Kolterman. This is a great bill. So as I'm reading the bill, it doesn't really have any requirements or rules about how it will be distributed, so do you have some thoughts on that?

KOLTERMAN: Yeah, the, the following people will address that in more detail, but you have to meet certain criteria in Step Up to Quality before you, before you're going to qualify to get these grants.

PANSING BROOKS: OK.

KOLTERMAN: And so I'll let the Nebraska Department of Education address that issue with you. And First Five Nebraska can probably talk about that as well, but there will be criteria developed to qualify you.

PANSING BROOKS: Great, thank you very much.

WALZ: Thank you. Any other questions? I see none. Thank you.

KOLTERMAN: I don't think I'm going to stay around to close because we're having an Appropriations [INAUDIBLE].

WALZ: OK.

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KOLTERMAN: Thank you.

WALZ: Proponents.

ADAM FESER: Chairwoman Walz and members of the Education Committee, my name is Adam Feser, A-d-a-m F-e-s-e-r, and I am a policy adviser representing First Five Nebraska. We are an early childhood policy organization dedicated to promoting quality care and learning experiences for Nebraska's youngest children. I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak in support of LB838 and want to thank Senator Kolterman for introducing this bill. I handed out my testimony and also the brief, which I emailed out to committee members last week, but I thought you might like a hard copy as well. Despite the obvious importance for childcare, there are very few benefits in this industry that make it a viable career for aspiring educators and entrepreneurs. Research from Nebraska's Early Childhood Workforce Commission found that only 39 percent of center-based teachers had health insurance. An early childhood program that is not able to offer quality insurance will lose employees to places that can offer it and often employees who love their jobs. High turnover rates and early childhood workforce loss decrease the amount of qual-- the amount and quality of care available for Nebraska's families. Supporting these small businesses directly contributes to the economic well-being of our state. Research demonstrates that quality early childhood experiences set children up for success in school and in life. Children who have access to quality care and education in their early years not only score better on tests, but they build the social and emotional skills that will serve them throughout life. This leads to improved graduation rates and decreased incarceration, incarceration rates, for instance. The early years represent an opportunity to build the best foundation possible. LB838 gives a chance to reduce turnover, improve and incentivize quality, and demonstrate to Nebraska's early childhood care and education providers that we see and value their important, necessary work. I hope you will advance this legislation to General File and if you have quest-- any questions, I will do my best to answer them.

WALZ: Thank you. Questions from the committee? Senator McKinney.

McKINNEY: Thank you, Chair Walz. Quick-- I got a couple questions.

ADAM FESER: Sure.

McKINNEY: So for a childcare center to access these funds, do they have to be in the Step Up to Quality program?

ADAM FESER: Yes. So in, in order-- the way this process is working is the board of the EHA can vote to open access to members. So there are, for instance, you know, some private schools and school board members that do do it. So if they vote to-- they can vote to open access like we're talking here and a, a testifier after me will speak to that. So in order to build the case that this fits the mission of the EHA and, you know, promotes school readiness, there needs to be some quality indicators to demonstrate that that's what you're working toward. So the, the parameters that they will be voting on would be if you are serving children on the childcare subsidy, Step 2, because we know that serving children on a subsidy creates barriers to a lot of the things we're talking about. And then if you're not serving children under the subsidy, Step 3, which is recognized quality.

McKINNEY: OK, so my follow-up, is this to retain the workforce or is this to make sure that childcare centers are providing quality care?

ADAM FESER: I think it does both. It should help with recruitment and retention of staff because-- and I wish-- I apologize. We were going to have childcare providers here that would benefit from this that have-- that qualify because they're Step 2 and serve children on a subsidy but have a difficult time retaining the force, workforce, but similar to what Sara said earlier, right now, we're seeing-- they couldn't come because they have rooms closed and have to be there for ratio because they have so many, so many of their staff out with COVID. So we're, we're seeing that. We're also seeing difficulty in hiring right now. Being able to offer access to quality health insurance, just like the rest of educators in Nebraska, would really help recruit and retain. But we also think there should be an incentive to enter the system and then climb as well. So I think it accomplishes both, which is why we like a policy like this.

McKINNEY: Because I was just thinking about those that may not be in Step Up to Quality, but they're struggling with retention, as far as workforce, that could probably benefit from the usage of these funds, but because they're not in Step Up to Quality, they won't be able to access them.

ADAM FESER: To, to build the case that this is a, a good idea for the EHA to bring these in, we needed some indicator that this is working toward school readiness and supporting their mission. I will say, and NDE will be here after me as well, that entering into the Step Up to Quality system is a relatively simple process and they have made improvements over the course of the last year to also offer a TA and

support moving towards Step 2. A lot of the-- I didn't print enough copies of this for everyone, but a lot of the-- what it takes to get to Step 2 are trainings that they're already doing. And sometimes it just takes a little support to try and help them navigate the system. But I think, I think Step Up to Quality is doing a good job of hopefully reaching out and helping programs that are interested in benefits like this so that they're able to get there. And I can just say the goal of this is to have access for the next enrollment period, which is September. That should-- hopefully we can get time to-- for programs to adjust and then over the course of years, we can keep this going and try to op-- broaden support.

McKINNEY: And the last thing, I talked with some childcare providers in my community and one of the concerns that they keep raising is they're being covered by DHHS and NDE they don't-- they're having a hard time understanding why they have to be covered by both essentially.

ADAM FESER: If they're-- I guess the tie to DHHS is where licensing is and also the childcare subsidy lives there, if that's-- if they're operating that program and so-- and it-- I guess I think it's pretty-- I wasn't here for the duration of all these mechanisms. I don't know why they live in two different departments.

McKINNEY: Um-hum.

ADAM FESER: Perhaps Melody, who's after me, can speak better about that. But I do think both of those-- the people that operate those programs are there to help, are hopefully there to help and willing to try and help providers navigate these systems. What we're trying to do here, though, I think would be game changing for a lot of providers in Linc-- in Nebraska. And I know I sent you a list that would currently qualify and then I think you-- there are a lot of providers that are probably already in Step Up to Quality, Step 1 that could just use a little TA and figure out the next step. And it's, it's a starting point and this is-- if we have questions about the numbers and things, I do have that information as well, but this would benefit a lot of providers in the state and in turn, a lot of children.

McKINNEY: All right, thank you.

ADAM FESER: Yep.

WALZ: Thank you. Senator Linehan.

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LINEHAN: Thank you, Chairman Walz. How many-- and if you don't know, it's OK, and just maybe can get for the committee-- how many licensed daycare providers are there in the state of Nebraska?

ADAM FESER: Oh, total?

LINEHAN: Total.

ADAM FESER: I think the number has gone down in the pandemic, but licensed total, I think, hovers around 3,000. It might have dipped below in-- over the course of the pandemic, though.

LINEHAN: And of those 3,000, how many are in Step Up to Quality?

ADAM FESER: Total in Step Up to Quality? Oh, shoot. Melody might be able to get that exact number. I would be able to provide what we're talking about here so I, I can give you the numbers for-- we pulled six months ago who would qualify for this program as we're--

LINEHAN: And what-- I'm--

ADAM FESER: --stating it?

LINEHAN: The question is how many are enrolled in Step Up to Quality now?

ADAM FESER: Yeah, I will-- so I have--

LINEHAN: If, if you don't have it, that's fine. You can get it.

ADAM FESER: Yeah, sorry, I-- Melody could definitely look at-- pull that real quick. She's after me. But I was going to say we did pull numbers for those that would be Step 2, serving the subsidy, or Step 3 and above if you're interested in that as well. That's what the parameters will be for this. So there'd be 163 centers, 48 Family Childcare Home 2s, and 39 Family Childcare Home 1s.

LINEHAN: So--

ADAM FESER: And that-- total staff that would be full time for those, we-- I called all the, I called all the centers that were on the list to get current numbers and the total full-time staff, I gathered for 124, then we used that to estimate for the others. The Family Childcare Home 1s are two staff, one-one, and the total of people that this-- that would be eligible would be around 2,285.

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LINEHAN: 2,285 people would be eligible. And then does somebody get-- because I don't want her to-- somebody's going to come up and explain the mechanics of this, like how much each daycare provider gets--

ADAM FESER: So--

LINEHAN: --where the \$15 million gets to go?

ADAM FESER: So the, that's-- the way we got to the \$15 million is we took those numbers that I collected, the data gathered, and reached out to the EHA actuary or consulting actuary. I forget his exact title. And he used his formulas that he normally uses to, to think of the range of possibility. And so for-- if we're going to insure the educator themselves, which is our goal, the estimate was basically like \$13.4 to \$16.3 million for the prem-- cost of premiums. And as I mentioned in the brief, an issue we have, if you are-- in the EHA at a school, they-- most-- almost all schools cover the vast majority of your premium costs. We know early childhood educators don't make nearly enough money to cover the cost of quality plans, but-- and then also the employer. The profit margins are so thin and right now with rooms go as much as they are, they're not going to be able to cover the cost of the premium. So that's what we brought this bill for. So this idea we've been trying to get, get going for quite a while, opening up the access to the EHA is the first step. Then there is a structure in place that would enable-- so like Family Childcare, Home 1 providers, that's one employee that operates in their home. They currently, with the EHA rules, couldn't enter the group as a-- or enter the pool as a group of one. So we will have in place a third party that will operate sort of the whole early childhood program. So Blue Cross Blue Shield can work with them, they work with the providers. And we do have someone I know is interested in that, that has the capability as well. So I might be going deeper-- I didn't know--

LINEHAN: No, no that's all very helpful. Thank you [INAUDIBLE]--

ADAM FESER: Always hard to tell how much to say.

LINEHAN: Thank you. No, thank you. I appreciate it.

WALZ: Any other questions? Thank you.

ADAM FESER: Thank you so much for your time.

WALZ: Thanks for coming. Next proponent.

MELODY HOBSON: Senator Walz, committee members, good afternoon. My name is Melody Hobson, M-e-l-o-d-y H-o-b-s-o-n, and I'm the administrator of the Office of Early Childhood Education at the Nebraska Department of Education. The Office of Early Childhood is responsible for approving training for childcare providers, co-administrating the Step Up to Quality program, and monitoring early childhood programs operated by public schools and educational service units. And on behalf of the Nebraska Department of Education. I'm testifying in support of LB838. And I don't think I need to really spend a lot of time, I think you've heard from a number of people that childcare programs do operate on very thin margins. Many cannot afford to provide a number of benefits for their, for their staff and that low wages, you know, really make things like health insurance out of-- you know, just out of range for a number of childcare providers. That does contribute to turnover within programs and even turnover outside of-- you know, to providers leaving the field. LB838 would provide funding to enable child childcare providers to access the health insurance and it would be a key factor in allowing providers to stay employed at their jobs. The Nebraska Department of Education does have the ability to administer this aid program with-- working with an outsider, third-party provider, and we would do so if LB838 is enacted. And I would be happy to answer any questions that I have any way-- questions that I can. You may have questions that I will need to get back with you on because I'm not a really good numbers person and truthfully, I don't Google on my phone nearly as well as maybe some others do, so--

WALZ: Thank you. Senator McKinney.

McKINNEY: Thank you, Chair Walz. My question, if we're facing a workforce crisis in the childcare industry, why, why aren't we just allowing the access to these funds to all childcare centers no matter what?

MELODY HOBSON: Again, I'm not-- I probably am not the right person for that. That would be something that would come from the, the insurer, the insurer, the board-- the organization. I do know that one of the reasons that we do support Step Up to Quality is because childcare licensing is-- if you, if you are licensed from childcare, that means you're operating legally and childcare licensing requirements come from health and human services. And they were designed to make sure that it was a safe place for young children. There are very few requirements that have to do with, you know, early childhood education or support for, for relationships, anything like that. And so Step Up

to Quality is something that allows programs to get help to-- at no charge to them to have a coach come in and help them with a number of things. There are different times that we are able to provide some materials and support for childcare providers, so it is designed to be a help for childcare providers. It, it is not designed to be any kind of a barrier. The other thing about Step Up to Quality is the, the criteria that are, are used for Step Up to Quality are objectively based and that is the only initiative at this point in Nebraska that has a reliability system built in through-- highly trained, but un-- unconnected to certain programs-- ability to go in and observe quality. So it is something that the-- the, the purpose is, is threefold, actually. It is to help families understand what quality early childhood programs are, what they look like, what, what they're-- you know, what, what they're-- the facets of them that make them quality is to help providers to access quality and to be the best that they can be. To say that a program-- we-- and we're not saying that a program that's not in Step Up to Quality is not quality. We just don't have that outside ability to determine that. So this is a way for families to help understand that the programs that they're working with that they have their children go to has determined that quality is important to them. They want to be the best that they can be and then they're not afraid of somebody coming in to look at them. And so we feel that it is something that has been successful and that's kind of, that's kind of wh. I don't know, it was a little bit-- wasn't maybe a straight a-to-b answer, but I hope that answered some of your question.

McKINNEY: It, it did somewhat. I'm just thinking about the parent that may have a kid that's in a program that's not in Step Up--

MELODY HOBSON: Right.

McKINNEY: --to Quality that's having issues with workforce retention.

MELODY HOBSON: Um-hum.

McKINNEY: And because of that problem, hypothetically, one day that they have to shut down.

MELODY HOBSON: Um-hum.

McKINNEY: And it affects the parent negatively because they have nowhere to send their child because they couldn't access some

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resources from the state to be able to keep up with the workforce retention.

MELODY HOBSON: Yeah.

McKINNEY: That's all I was thinking.

MELODY HOBSON: Yeah, yeah, and that is an issue, but that is something that certainly we want to make sure that they can access them and we want as many programs in Step Up to Quality as possible.

WALZ: Senator Linehan.

LINEHAN: Thank you, Chairman Walz. Maybe I-- I'm not sure I understand and I don't want to leave without understanding it. Can you explain to me what the Education Health Alliance is?

MELODY HOBSON: OK that-- OK and I'm not an expert at this. We might have to get some, get some better answers. That is the, the pool that school districts and educational service units have for to, to base their rates on. They're part of a, a, a, an edu-- an insurance pool. And that is the, the school district education pool.

LINEHAN: So if a school district has a preschool, wouldn't the workers in that workforce already be in--

MELODY HOBSON: The school district-- yes, actually. If-- but with the teachers, I, I don't know--

LINEHAN: I'm sorry, if they're what?

MELODY HOBSON: Like that the, the preschool teachers or Step Up to Quality, infant/toddler teachers, I don't know of a single school district that does not allow that. But again, there are 244 school districts and there are about 3,000 childcare providers. So the school districts are just a small fraction of the number of, of the early childhood program staff operating in the state.

LINEHAN: But wouldn't most of the school districts be in the Step Up to Quality program?

MELODY HOBSON: Not necessarily. They don't-- they're not required to be.

LINEHAN: So who are the 163 plus 39-- to 200 out of the 3,000 are--

MELODY HOBSON: OK. There are about 900--some programs that have started down the path of be-- of, of being in Step Up to Quality. They've started their staff in-- getting their staff into the Nebraska Early Childhood Professional Record System. The, the director may be working on the orientation, which is an on-- video based, like hour and a half training. And so they are working on that part. There are, as-- before Christmas, there were, there were more than 600 and I can't tell you the exact number, more than 600 programs that have already been rated either 1 or higher. And so that subset that you heard Adam talk about were the ones who were rated either, either a Step 2 or higher with taking subsidy or a 3 or higher who may or may not be taking subsidy. Does that make sense?

LINEHAN: It does, but there's 600 at one--

MELODY HOBSON: The, the large pool is the 3,000 childcare providers. OK, early childhood is much more complex than one would think it should be. School districts, there are about 210 or 215, 220 programs that are, that are school district operated. They may-- they probably will not show up in the licensed childcare provider number of about 3,000.

LINEHAN: So they're in addition to the 3,000.

MELODY HOBSON: They're in addition to.

LINEHAN: OK. All right, thank you very much. It's-- I'm sorry.

MELODY HOBSON: Yeah, yeah.

WALZ: Go ahead.

LINEHAN: Somebody here going to-- is somebody lined up to explain how this would work as far as who pays what and how much and--

MELODY HOBSON: I don't, I don't know.

LINEHAN: OK, so I'm going to ask you the question--

MELODY HOBSON: OK.

LINEHAN: --for the record. So if this program would-- if it's \$13,000 per employee, would the state-- would this program be picking up all \$13,000 or would they-- employer have to pay some of it?

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MELODY HOBSON: That is something that, that I will try to get back to you.

LINEHAN: OK.

MELODY HOBSON: It probably won't be tomorrow, but we'll--

LINEHAN: OK, all right.

MELODY HOBSON: --but I, I'll try to get as much information as I can.

LINEHAN: All right, thank you very much.

WALZ: All right. Any other questions?

MELODY HOBSON: Thank you.

WALZ: Thank you. Next proponent.

COLBY COASH: Good afternoon again, Senator Walz and members of the Education Committee. Colby Coash, here representing the Association of School Boards in support of LB838. Early childhood is a pretty important factor in the quality of K-12 education and we have a standing position at NASB that states we support quality early childhood education programs accessible to all children and advocate for programs that provide age-appropriate activities to, to prepare children for school. We know that good early childhood programs assist kids in coming to school ready to learn and a quality workforce is vital to carrying out that mission. And these workers are in high demand across our state and we hope that LB838 will be an important part of increasing and keeping that workforce. I've also passed out a letter from the Nebraska Child Health and Education Alliance who's also in support, asked me to hand that off to you. In closing, I, I am not here representing the Educators Health Alliance, but I, I can maybe answer a few questions about that. That is the insurance pool that all but four districts across the state have come together and pooled to create the Educators Health Alliance and they provide the health insurance to their members across the state and so it's a pretty large pool. As Senator Kolterman said, he sat on that board for some time when he was on the school board so he's familiar with this. And right now, early childhood, they're not-- early childhood workers outside of the schools, right, are not part of the EHA. If you're an early childhood worker and you're an employee of the school, as an employee of the school, you would be eligible for the health insurance. It's my understanding this bill is for all those other

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ones, child-- early childhood providers who are outside the school system. The EHA has talked about this several times over the year. Mr. Feser has been part of those discussions. They'll be looking at the possibility of opening this up at their, their next meeting, which would be here in less than 30 days.

WALZ: Any questions from the committee?

COLBY COASH: Thank you. Oh.

WALZ: Senator Linehan.

LINEHAN: Are you saying you could describe how this would work, like what the-- what I'm trying to figure out is if it's 2,000, almost 2,300 employees and it's \$14,000 or \$13,000 an employee, \$15 million isn't enough to cover it.

COLBY COASH: Well, it's not, I don't believe, designed to cover everything. I mean, they're still-- it's a--

LINEHAN: So--

COLBY COASH: -- sub-- it's a subsidy. But what, wha-- as my understanding happened, it-- right now, an individual person can't just come into the EHA. It's got to-- you got to be part of a school district, right, unless the EHA changes its, its rules here. And so the idea here is that this money can be used to, to put a point of contact between the EHA and the early childhood workforce so that they can then access it if the EHA then allows, allows that through a vote of their board.

LINEHAN: What happens to the \$15 million? That's what I'm-- I don't understand. Where's the \$15 million go?

COLBY COASH: It goes-- it would go to subsidize the premium for those workers outside of the schools-- school system.

LINEHAN: OK. I think it would be good if the committee had like a idea of how that would work because if you're paying 100 percent of it, that would be one thing, but it's not enough to cover 100 percent of it, so how's a daycare worker going to provide \$500 a month--

COLBY COASH: Sure.

LINEHAN: --if they have to pick up half of it,.

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COLBY COASH: I'm sure First Five would be able--

LINEHAN: OK.

COLBY COASH: --to put that together for you.

LINEHAN: OK, thank you.

WALZ: All right, any other questions?

COLBY COASH: Thank you.

WALZ: Thank you. Next proponent.

REBECCA FIRESTONE: Good afternoon, Chair-- Chairperson Walz and members of the Education Committee. My name is Rebecca Firestone, R-e-b-e-c-c-a F-i-r-e-s-t-o-n-e, and I've just joined OpenSky Policy Institute as the new executive director. I'm here to testify today in support of LB838 because we believe Nebraska would benefit greatly from increased investments in early childhood education, especially given that 43 states spend more per child in preschool than we do here in Nebraska. Evidence shows that investments in high-quality early childhood education are investments in economic development. Early childhood education can bring more and better jobs to a state, which promotes higher per capita earnings, according to the Upjohn Institute. Research by Timothy Bariek from Upjohn shows that for every dollar a state invests in universal pre-K education, the per capita earnings of state residents increased by \$2.78. That's a nearly 3 to 1 return on investment. Those benefits also grow over time, with each dollar returning between \$8 and \$16 to the state, mainly through reduced future costs of crime and government assistance. Nebraska is currently experiencing a critical shortage of early child education workers, as we've heard from other people discussing this bill. This shortage is not hurting only families needing care, but also our state and local economies. As of early 2020, 75 percent of parents with children under the age of six lived in a household where both parents worked. However, 84 percent of our counties lack the capacity to meet those needs. If we can grow and support this workforce, we will not only be helping children earn more as adults, but we'll also be increasing the labor productivity of their parents and stimulate our economy both locally and across the state. We therefore see early childhood education as clearly worthwhile investment of state dollars. We do, however, have concerns about sustaining this funding once the federal dollars currently boosting our state revenues end. We would

therefore prefer a dedicated revenue source to support future costs and to prevent cuts to other vital services the state provides like healthcare and K-12 education. Such a source could be structured to go beyond the \$15 million requested here and thus better meet the state's funding needs for early childhood. One recent study suggests it would take an additional \$109 million in state funds, \$191 million in federal funds, and another \$153 million in private funds from families, businesses, and philanthropy to provide high-quality early childhood services to all of Nebraska's children and families. Thank you for your time. I'm happy to answer any questions.

WALZ: Thank you. Questions from the committee? Thank you. Next proponent. Opponents.

GWEN EASTER: Hello.

WALZ: Good afternoon.

GWEN EASTER: My name is Gwen Easter. I'm the founder of Safe Haven Early Childhood Preschool Education Academy and the founder of Safe Haven Community Center, a nonprofit organization in north Omaha. My organization and childcare business has been here for 23 years. I'm appointed by Governor Ricketts to the Early Childhood Interagency Coordinating Council and I'm not here on behalf of that council, nor am I here on behalf of the African-American Commission. I'm here on, on-- to support the childcare business owners. We can't allow these entities to continue to downplay and discard our private childcare businesses to advance and expand their partnerships with Educare and the early learning centers throughout our communities and take credit for our hard work and labor to care and educate our young children. These organizations and the Department of Education's interests are fulfilling what the organization's agenda and monetary gain for government agencies to strengthen the University of Nebraska, the Department of Education, the early learning centers, and their early learning partnerships and workforce commission, causing the monopolization of childcare, childcare in Nebraska. This childcare industry is suffering here in north Omaha and across Nebraska because of the public and private partnerships in the Nebraska Department of Education. Across this-- across the nation and before COVID, 11 percent of childcare businesses have closed due to a wealthy organization and partnerships like this working on bills with government agencies to dismantle the in-home and childcare businesses. The Department of Education, First Five Nebraska, the Buffett Early Childhood Institute have helped to write early childhood bills, do not

have private childcare business on its best interest at heart. Private in-home childcare businesses owners' voice counts in Nebraska, west and in rural communities. However, when the decisions to create early childhood education, our terms were made, many of the long-standing business owners were not invited to the table. It appears that there has been a agenda at work that does not support early childhood educational professionals. The Step Up to Quality was for, was for the-- Step Up to Quality Act was for providers who, who are on 25-- 250k in, in subsidy, subsidy payments from the federal government out of the childcare block grant funds. The DOE and the Step up to Quality partnerships team have created a rating system and forcing independent childcare providers to follow their design. It-- Step Up to Quality is not-- is an unfair system and is unfair to the private childcare businesses. And they can use insurance and they can use whatever they want to, but they do not have our best interests. They are paying-- they, they, they, they are soliciting independent licensed childcare providers with free tax programs, free counting programs, cash incentives, grants, you know, to-- discounts, professional trainings, website. Their websites include other private childcare businesses who do not choose to be under their collaborative. They have set up criterias to qualify for the read-- for the school readiness tax and the Step Up to Quality rating system, which only benefits their centers and some rural, rural communities and their partnerships. Only their programs or-- are-- or those programs who follow their criteria and join their collaborative have these benefits until, until such time as they have monopolized these childcare business-- our childcare businesses. The unfair system discriminates against parents' choice and the independent childcare workforce and creates a monopoly in Nebraska. The Step Up to Quality rating center and resources and referral websites, both created and run by the Nebraska Department of Education, discriminates against the independent childcare workforce and favors only their programs. They are using private childcare businesses to, to, to, to obtain funding to help their, their centers, to help may-- maybe rural communities that where-- where there was a need for childcare businesses to be put in their communities. They came into north Omaha and pushed out a predominantly 200-some daycare businesses and they want to talk about quality? I worked hard to provide a good preschool program and a tutoring program for children in my community. I took trainings that, that nobody asked me to take to help, help my child and there are many childcare businesses that are qualified, have earned the right to have their business and we should not be coming under Nebraska Department of Education for anything. We are under DHS [SIC]. We follow the rules that they ask us

to follow and for them to use and say that there is no quality in our, in our centers because we're in a home and they need to come in and teach us when their trainings are no good-- and that's another thing. My organization provides early childhood trainings, been providing it, been teaching children, been helping families. And these organizations come to my community duplicating my programs and services. I've been helping children with dyslexia before there was anybody helping children with dyslexia or anything else. And I'm tired of these organizations and daycares-- these organizations by these early childhood centers and Nebraska Department of Education downplaying my work and then, and then using, using trainings-- use it. Every time I'm submitting, submitting to, to provide trainings and [INAUDIBLE] to, to providers or to parents, they duplicating our-- my programs and then putting meetings and everything on, on, on the same date that, that, that I have my programs and services. I worked to-- I worked hard and so have other childcare businesses that have, have-- that, that help children in this community and we're tired of being downplayed.

WALZ: Let's see if they-- if we have any questions from the committee.

GWEN EASTER: I'm sorry.

WALZ: It's all right.

GWEN EASTER: I'm sorry.

WALZ: It's OK. Thank you. Senator McKinney.

McKINNEY: Thank you and thank you, Ms. Easter. I just got one question. So without the Step, Step Up to Quality requirement, do you think childcare centers in north Omaha could benefit from the ability to access these funds?

GWEN EASTER: I don't believe that we'll be able to access anything, any type of funding as long as they're-- they have the power over, over the funds. I don't-- Step Up to Quality, first of all, is an unfair system. It rates me at a 2. It rates me at a 2 and it rates other long-standing, private childcare business owners who have worked hard, who have helped children throughout the decades-- it is an unfair system and what I'm asking you all is to go back and reexamine how all of this was set up back in 2012, 2014. When we were working in our daycares helping our children, they were going behind our backs, putting these, putting all these legislatures-- bills together to tell

y'all that we-- we're not quality, to tell you all that, that we're not, we're not educating children, to tell-- say that parents don't know how to, to recognize what, what, what's the best care for their children. They want the authority over our children, over our families-- it's not right-- over our businesses. This isn't right. I shouldn't have to be struggling and competing with free daycares in my community that has been built across the street and down the street when all I'm trying to do is provide a tutoring program to continue to help my kids and get my early childhood kids ready and prepared for school, because our school system is failing our children. I mean, I'm saying-- I know this isn't about your bill, but the fact that they want to not even, you know, allow school choice. So if a parent, I-- want to bring their child to my daycare center because I'm providing certain services and special serve-- they should have every right to do so. Take this money and use it to help, help us to help those kids that's not getting the help that they need.

WALZ: Let's see if we have any other questions. Senator McKinney, did you want to follow up on that?

McKINNEY: No, I'm, I'm done.

WALZ: OK. Any other questions from the committee? I see none. Thank you so much for coming today.

GWEN EASTER: Thank you. And please get us from a-- I would, I would like to be able to provide my training and my services without being monopolized. I appreciate it.

WALZ: Thank you. Any of their opponents? Anybody in the neutral? Senator Kolterman left, so he won't be closing. We did have 17 submitted testimonies from Adrienne Agulla, Erika Fink, Shannon Cotta-- I'm not going to say this right-- Cotsoradis, Shannon Cotsoradis, Jo Giles, Laura Kemp, Diane Livingston, Christine Bruner, Kristen Hassebrook, Schuyler Rotert, Rachel Sissel, Jo Etta Brown, Lisa Guenther, Jennifer Umana, Britney Watson, Aubrey Mancuso, and Shannon Ferguson. And with that, we will end our hearing on LB838. Thank you so much.