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LB 577

bill. What would LB 577 do? With the committee amendment and the amendment to that amendment, it would prioritize the grants, the expanded number of grants, with an emphasis on using the new funds to expand the availability of programs for at-risk four-year-olds. And it would also move four-year-olds from the grant program to state aid, after the program has received grants for three years. An amendment to the committee amendment would push state aid to the 2007-2008 school year. That's delaying it another year. The existing Early Childhood Education Grant Program would be the gatekeeper. And this is a critically important point. All programs would need to continue to meet the requirements of the program in order to get state funds, from either the grant program or from state aid to school districts. The grant program is the gatekeeper. And one of the parts of that gate is a high-quality program. Plus, as I just mentioned, this is a mechanism by which the grant funds, and then, eventually, state aid to four-year-olds, is directed to those children, communities that have at-risk children. The programs are required to be collaborative, to meet quality standards, and to be available to diverse preschool populations. I'm talking there about the grant programs which have been in place, I think, since 1990. So this is not a newfangled idea, one that we don't have experience. This is a program that has clearly proven itself over the years. As I say, it's been successful a number of years in focusing state resources on quality programs that will improve the success of the children both as they enter the elementary grades and as they contribute to society as working adults. I'll just add quickly that I unfortunately can't claim much credit for the construction of this program, the way it operates. I don't know a lot about what occurs in other states, except that more than 40 other states do in fact invest in early childhood education. But I suspect that the mechanism we're proposing here in Nebraska ranks as one of the best in the nation, for the following reasons. The Early Childhood Grant Program provides a way to initiate an effort in a community without immediately putting it into the state aid formula. It is a...it must be collaborative. You must have contributions. At least half the contributions have to come from other than the state. And obviously, the department is responsible for maintaining a high-quality effort. So all in all, I think this is an excellent approach, one that I