

**TESTIMONY ON HB 1466
Human Services Committee
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Chairman Lee and Members of the Committee:

My name is Amanda Peterson, and I am a Director in the Office of Educational Equity and Support with the Department of Public Instruction. This office oversees Title I, Neglected and Delinquent and Homeless Education Programs, Title IV, safe and healthy school projects, and the comprehensive and targeted support given to our lowest performing schools. Clearly, our office supports K-12 students that are most at-risk, disadvantaged, and in need of support. However, today, I am here to speak in support of House Bill 1466, which would provide funding and support to the earliest of learners. It is my belief, and research supports this belief, that strengthening early childhood programs directly supports K-12 education and increases the likelihood that the goals, interventions, and supports we put into place at the K-12 level will complete the North Dakota vision that “all students graduate choice ready with the knowledge, skills, and disposition to be successful”.

We know that young children develop relationship-building skills and behaviors through early interactions with important adults in their lives, and these relationships provide opportunities to practice skills learned from these interactions. Because of this, children who develop trusting relationships with adults are able to fully explore and engage in the world around them, foster problem-solving skills, and access tools to aid in interactions with others. As children grow, they become increasingly interested in forming relationships with peers, and the first five years are a critical time for learning how to manage emotions. In addition, when children feel good about

themselves, they engage more fully in learning opportunities. Due to this, strong social and emotional development go hand-in-hand with academic and cognitive learning growth in the early years which, by extension, follow them throughout their K-12 career and beyond.

When a child is entering kindergarten, children who have experienced high-quality early childhood experiences have the ability to express a broad range of emotions and can recognize these emotions in themselves and others. Conversely, those that have not had the opportunity to engage in these supportive experiences, have difficulties navigating relationships with both peers and adults, which has led to some troubling data. Although trying to collect data on behaviors is difficult as local school districts measure behavior in a myriad of ways, one data set that helps us measure social emotional readiness for school is the tracking of incidences that lead to the removal of students from the regular classroom environment. This report is the Suspension, Expulsion, and Truancy report. The US Department of Education requires the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction to annually report data on truancy rates, and the frequency, seriousness, and incidence of violent and drug-related offenses resulting in suspensions and expulsions in all elementary, middle and secondary schools in the state. In the past five years, reported incidences in grades K-3 involving suspensions, expulsions, and truanicies have increased. In 2015-2016, 10% of the incidences reported came from K-3 grade levels. In the 2019-2020 school year, that number has increased to 16%. Even more alarming is that early grades make up 80% of all incidences in 19-20. These upward trends for the youngest of our students are distressing, especially when we know that these early grades are absolutely critical to building a strong academic foundation.

Again, neither agency- Department of Human Services nor the Department of Public Instruction- can do this work alone. We need to continue to build upon and strengthen partnerships already established between agencies to meet our young people and their family's needs. To do this,

though, we must provide authority and funding to high-quality early childhood experiences for North Dakota.

Chairwoman Lee and Members of the Committee this concludes my prepared testimony, and I will stand for any questions that you may have.