



## SENATE BILL 2323 TESTIMONY

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Chairperson Lee and members of the Senate Human Services Committee, I am pleased to appear before you today to testify in favor of Senate Bill 2323. My name is Allison Driessen, and I am the President of the North Dakota Head Start Association. The North Dakota Head Start Association represents over 2300 low income children and families served by thirteen programs, 10 programs and 3 tribal. Head start employees 995 employees and partners with rural and urban communities across the state. [NHSA North Dakota 2023 Head Start & Early Head Start Profile](#)

Senator Hogan's testimony provides an overview of the child care crisis, Best in Class and Head Start services and afterschool programming. The December 2022 Kids Count North Dakota article [North Dakota's Child Care System: Investments Needed to Support Families and Child Care Businesses](#) provides the data for needs, availability and cost with recommendations surrounding access, quality and affordability. The intent of my testimony is to support the bill and recommend that critical early childhood education and intervention services exist in a mixed delivery system to meet the needs of children, families, and communities.

For 57 years, Head Start programs have partnered with parents living in poverty to prepare their children for success in school and in life, and support family self-sufficiency. Head Start is a federal program that serves families at 100% of the poverty level. To be income eligible for Head Start a family of four cannot make more than \$30,000, The program does have a small percentage of enrollment that is reserved for over income families, and they must show the highest need for the program based on an eligibility selection criterion. What sets Head Start apart from other preschool programs is its commitment to the overall development of the child and family including annual physicals, dentals, vision, hearing, nutrition, and developmental screenings, ongoing assessment and its focus on parent education and engagement. Head Start

programs employee Nurses, Social Workers, Dieticians, Home Visitors, Prenatal Educators, etc. to provide extended services.

The North Dakota Head Start Association has advocated for two decades for state funded Head Start and promoted the importance of early childhood education. Best in Class was designed after the Head Start model incorporating parent engagement and health requirements for children the year prior to starting kindergarten. Senate Bill 2323 provides opportunities to expand Head Start and the Best in Class program as well as improving other early childhood and afterschool programs. The North Dakota Head Start Association is excited for this opportunity and recognizes that expanding services requires community partnership and not stand alone programs. An excellent resource from Early Care and Education Consortium [A Mixed Delivery System is the Most Sustainable and Efficient Solution to Meet Policy Objectives](#) outlines the opportunities of a mixed delivery system and the negative unintended consequences of limiting private participation or a public only delivery system. I am concerned for our child care partners in homes and centers who need to be included in this vision and the availability of workforce.

I would like to stand in front of the Human Services Committee and say that the ten Head Start programs across the state are ready and able to expand services to all income eligible children. Head Start programs face many of the same challenges that non-profits and businesses do. Operating costs have significantly increased, workforce and labor shortages are impacting early learning programs and many Head Start programs do not have adequate facility space to expand and serve more children. There are 414 income eligible preschool children and 395 over income children on the waiting lists across nine of ten programs in North Dakota. The seven Early Head Start programs report 410 income eligible infants and 130 over income infants and toddlers on waiting lists. Programs report 55 staff openings and 70% of North Dakota programs have reduced or are requesting to reduce enrollment to increase staff salaries because programs cannot find qualified individuals to fill vacancies. The number of early childhood education graduates across the state is not published and does not reflect the number of students who are already employed in programs.

Not all families need the full services of Head Start. Pre-Kindergarten programs often have limited days and hours. Most pre-kindergarten programs do not have before and after school child care. A mixed delivery system administers funds across licensed centers and family based child care programs, Head Start, Early Head Start, and public schools and community-based organizations to ensure access to high-quality affordable options.

Imagine a four year old classroom funded by Best in Class, Head Start and Child Care/private pay. Children at 100% of poverty are funded by Head Start, families who are over the 100% poverty threshold and are eligible for free and reduced meals are covered by Best in Class and over income families are for payment through child care. All families receive the same educational services and parent engagement opportunities. Before and after school child care can be accessed through child care assistance or for pay for extended hours. Child care can be contracted through a child care provider, center or afterschool program or the school can transport children to a home provider for wrap around care. This approach would promote education continuity and is responsive to the needs of parents.

There are significant negative unintended consequences of limiting participation or a public only delivery system. Four year olds are pulled out of home, faith and center-based settings. Providers lose revenue from reduced enrollment and must increase prices for infant and toddler care to cover cost. Parents will struggle to find affordable options for their infants and toddlers. Providers will close if they cannot maintain enrollment at higher prices. Lack of care options reduces workforce productivity for parents who cannot find affordable care, which coupled with child care closures, has downstream negative impact on the economy.

Senate Bill 2323 is an important step in expanding availability to early childhood services. It is critical that preference for funding include collaboration to offer educational services that meets the needs of families and not further complicated child care shortages.

Thank you Chairman Lee and committee members and stand for questions.