

Chair Lee and members of the Human Services committee:

I write today regarding SB2323 which proposes to award grants for early childhood programs in North Dakota.

I write in support of the intent of funding early childhood in our state but would like for the committee to deeply examine if the listed spending elements are the best use of these funds.

The additional funding of Best in Class and Head start only fixes half the problem. Those programs are school year only and part days. This leaves parents to either restrict their availability for working to school hours, piecing together coverage between parents and/or other family members, or finding wrap around care. For licensed programs to enroll these students for wrap around care they either lose part of the income for that spot by only charging for the wrap around hours or the parent is left paying for the whole spot. Paying for the whole spot is typical since the child will be needing care on scheduled no school days, snow emergency days off, and throughout the summer.

Although I am encouraged by the things I have heard about the Best in Class program I urge the committee to delay any large investments until the full pilot program has been completed. We are currently in the second year of this program and haven't had a chance to follow these children through even an entire year of kindergarten to know if there is any longitudinal benefit in exchange for the investment. Those funds could be equally-well spent boosting the efforts in full day programs where wrap around care is already included so there are less transitions through the child's day, both in environment and caregivers. A huge barrier to licensed childcare programs participating in Best in Class is the minimum qualifications to participate.

While I support the additional funding for both Best in Class and Head Start programs I do so with caution and need the committee to understand that licensed childcare programs, along with other caregivers in a child's life, is the support for those programs and should not be at the bottom of the list as it is in the proposed bill.

This bill also proposes to develop a quality rating system for afterschool programs. The QRIS system comes out of federal mandate in the block grant funding. The intention was to ensure that parents had a way to find quality childcare programs. The QRIS system isn't perfect but it offers consistent metrics to be able to compare programs with the same lens. As the ND Kids Count report outlines, the majority of licensed childcare programs in our state do not participate in the QRIS program. I suggest that a study needs to be done to determine barriers to participation and I agree with that suggestion. We need to fully know why programs choose not to participate. We need to know why programs stop their journey before achieving the full 4 stars.

If afterschool programs are to be added to the QRIS system in ND it is my opinion that any benefits they receive from that participation be prorated to reflect the much-reduced time they spend with children since their population is in school most of the day. Although early childhood encompasses birth through age 8 we know that investments made in the years before kindergarten have a great impact on school age achievements.

In closing, I feel that the proposed funding is a good starting off point but we need to include this in the larger discussion taking place in many different committees this session on how to fund early childhood experiences in a mixed-delivery system.

Thank you for your time.

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