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YMCA of The Northern Sky
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Written Testimony for North Dakota HB 1012

Submitted by: YMCA of the Northern Sky

Good morning, Chair and Members of the Committee,
My name is Tania Zerr, and I am the Executive Director of Child Care Programs for the YMCA of the Northern Sky. I want to thank you for the opportunity to share how the Best in Class (BIC) program has positively impacted our organization, the children and families we serve, and our community as a whole. I strongly urge your continued support of this vital initiative and we fully support this bill.

Overview of Our Child Care Programs

The YMCA of the Northern Sky provides care for approximately 2,500 children daily across the community. With four Early Childhood Learning Centers and 21 school-age programs, we are deeply committed to providing high-quality care and education for children of all backgrounds.

The Best-in-Class program has been transformative for our organization, especially as we face a national child care staffing crisis and increasing demands for quality in early childhood education.

Benefits of Best in Class (BIC) for Children and Families

The Best in Class (BIC) program is a transformative initiative that benefits not only children and families but also early childhood educators and the profession as a whole. By investing in high-quality early childhood education, we are fostering developmental growth, school readiness, and long-term success for young learners while strengthening the child care workforce and advancing the field of early education.

The BIC program ensures that children receive individualized, developmentally appropriate instruction and support, fostering their cognitive, social-emotional, and physical growth. Early learning environments enriched by BIC practices promote:

- **Early Skill Development:** Children gain foundational literacy and numeracy skills, social-emotional regulation, and motor development, preparing them for future academic success.
- **Health and Developmental Screenings:** Early identification of potential delays allows for timely interventions, reducing long-term educational disparities.
- **Parental Support and Engagement:** Families receive guidance and resources to reinforce learning at home, creating a cohesive support system between educators and parents.

Testimonial from Kari and Douglas Uzzle

The BIC program's impact is best illustrated through real-life experiences. One such story comes from Kari Uzzle, whose daughter, Charlotte, benefited immensely from the YMCA's Early Learning program:

"Our daughter, Charlotte, was born prematurely at 30 weeks and spent three months in the NICU. She faced challenges with feeding and slow growth. While Early Intervention Services provided valuable support, we noticed significant growth in Charlotte after she started at the YMCA's Early Learning program. Before enrolling, she was making good progress but still slightly behind her peers. However, at the YMCA, she blossomed! Her speech improved dramatically; she went from using single words to forming full sentences. Her fine motor skills also developed significantly, and she even learned to jump!"

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Fercho YMCA
400 1st Ave S, Fargo, ND 58103
701.293.9622

Schlossman YMCA
4243 19th Ave S, Fargo ND 58103
701.281.0126

Fergus Falls YMCA
1164 Friberg Ave Fergus Falls, MN 56537
218.739.4489



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We were initially concerned about her readiness for kindergarten, but the YMCA program instilled in her the confidence and social skills she needed to thrive. She grew in her color knowledge, number and letter recognition, and even sight words! Her teachers were incredibly knowledgeable and supportive, providing regular updates on her progress and offering valuable guidance for us to support her learning at home.

Thanks to the Best-in-Class program's health screenings, we discovered Charlotte had mild hearing loss. This early detection will allow her to receive necessary treatment (ear tubes) before the start of her kindergarten year, preventing potential academic delays. We are incredibly grateful for the positive impact the YMCA's Early Learning Program has had on Charlotte's development and our family's peace of mind. We highly recommend their programs to any family seeking a nurturing and enriching environment for their child."

Financial Support for Families

The sliding fee scale plays a vital role in ensuring families of all income levels can access high-quality early childhood education. For many families in our community, this has been transformative, providing affordable care they might not otherwise be able to afford.

Benefits for Educators and the Early Childhood Profession

The BIC program provides invaluable support to child care staff and strengthens the early childhood education profession by:

- **Enhanced Professional Development:** Teachers receive ongoing training in best practices, including curriculum implementation, behavior guidance, and inclusive teaching strategies.
- **Teacher Coaching and Professional Development**
 - Best in Class provides coaches who work directly with our teachers to:
 - Ensure the curriculum supports all areas of development and aligns with the North Dakota Early Learning Standards.
 - Foster inclusive environments.
 - Administer Ages and Stages screenings for developmental progress.
 - Deliver specialized training for BIC teachers, which enhances their ability to support children and families.
 - Through this support, we've seen measurable improvements in teacher effectiveness and classroom quality.
- **Increased Job Satisfaction and Retention:** Supportive work environments, clear pathways for advancement, and access to resources empower educators and reduce turnover.
- **Strengthened Workforce Pipeline:** By prioritizing workforce development, the BIC program attracts and retains skilled professionals, ensuring consistent, high-quality care for children.
- **Classroom Enhancements**
 - In 2023 and 2024, BIC grant dollars allowed us to invest in classroom furniture, materials, and equipment, updating and improving our learning environments.

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- Teachers collaborate with coaches to create prioritized purchasing lists based on need and budget.
- Coaches guide teachers in implementing new materials effectively.
- **Increased Teacher Wages**
 - Thanks to Best-in-Class funding, we have been able to increase wages for our early childhood teachers significantly: Licensing requires minimum qualifications, at the YMCA we have three levels of teacher based upon their credentials with wages ranging from \$17.74 to \$22.05.
 - This has allowed us to better recruit and retain qualified staff in a highly competitive job market. However, we know that we will never be able to return to pre-BIC pay rates. Sustaining these wage increases is critical to maintaining a stable workforce and ensuring consistent, high-quality care.

Strengthening Early Childhood Education for the Future

The passage of House Bill 1497 would further the mission of the BIC program, ensuring more children and families benefit from high-quality early learning experiences. By investing in this initiative, we are not only supporting our youngest learners but also building a stronger, more resilient early childhood education system that benefits children, families, educators, and society as a whole.

Closing

The benefits of the Best-in-Class program extend beyond individual child care centers—they strengthen families, prepare children for school, and build a foundation for future community success.

Sincerely,

Tania Zerr
YMCA Learning Center
Executive Director
zerr@ymcanorthernsky.org / 218-359-2331

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