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YMCA of The Northern Sky
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Written Testimony for North Dakota HB 1497

Submitted by: YMCA of the Northern Sky

Good morning, 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 the Best-in-Class Program

1. Enhanced Child Care Ratios and Group Sizes

Best in Class emphasizes smaller group sizes for optimal learning

2. 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. As an organization, we aspire to align the sliding fee scale more closely with the child care assistance scale to further enhance accessibility and support for families in need.

3. 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.

4. Screenings and Early Interventions

Health screenings (vision, dental, hearing) and developmental assessments have led to early identification of needs and referrals for children. This early intervention ensures that children are set up for success before entering kindergarten, addressing potential challenges proactively.

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5. 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.

- Teachers collaborate with coaches to create prioritized purchasing lists based on need and budget.
- Coaches guide teachers in implementing new materials effectively.

This structured process ensures that resources are used efficiently and have the greatest impact on children's learning.

6. Health and Safety Focus

A dedicated Health and Safety Specialist supports our programs by:

- Conducting self-assessments and setting goals for improvement.
- Sharing best practices for maintaining health and safety in our classrooms.

This emphasis has reinforced the well-being of children and staff alike.

7. 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.

Why Continued Support is Critical

Child care is in a national staffing crisis, and without programs like Best in Class, the challenges facing providers will only grow. This program has empowered us to improve teacher pay, enhance classroom quality, and support the health and development of children in ways that would not have been possible otherwise.

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.

Recommendations for BIC

1. Adjust Eligibility Date for Four-Year-Old Access

We recommend extending the eligibility cutoff date for four-year-old access to **December 1st**. Currently, the cutoff date of August 1st prevents many children who turn four in late summer or early fall from participating in the program. By extending the eligibility window, children who turn four after August 1st could benefit from two years of program participation instead of only one.

We further propose striking the current clause stating:

"August first in the year of enrollment, unless the child will be four years old before December first and the child:" (1) By means of developmental and readiness screening instruments approved by the superintendent of public instruction and administered by the four-year-old program operator, demonstrates superior academic talents or abilities and social and emotional readiness;"

Instead, we suggest the program include children within the extended cutoff. By allowing children who may not meet these higher thresholds to participate for two years, the program would provide valuable

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opportunities for growth and development, better preparing them for a successful kindergarten experience.

2. Ability to meet child care classroom capacity

We recommend allowing programs to enroll children who turn four throughout the year to meet classroom capacity needs. These additional children would benefit from participating in the program but would not count toward the final benchmarks for the BIC program. This adjustment is critical to addressing the challenges of under-enrollment and ensuring classrooms are utilized effectively.

Currently, limiting classrooms to only BIC-eligible four-year-old children results in unused slots, despite having teachers and resources in place to support full enrollment. This underutilization directly impacts the workforce in our community. Families rely on child care to remain in or re-enter the workforce, and when programs cannot enroll to capacity, it creates a ripple effect—reducing the availability of quality child care options and hindering economic growth.

By allowing programs to enroll additional children to fill empty slots, we can better support families, fully utilize teaching staff, and strengthen the community workforce.

3. Align Sliding Fee Scale with Child Care Assistance Scale

We recommend aligning the **BIC sliding fee scale** with the existing **Child Care Assistance sliding fee scale** to create consistency and reduce confusion for families. Currently, the BIC copayments are lower than those required under the child care assistance program, which leads to misunderstandings and discrepancies for families regarding their payment obligations.

This inconsistency causes frustration and confusion as families transition between programs or compare their financial responsibilities. Aligning the two scales would provide clarity, streamline processes for families and providers, and ensure equity in how payments are determined. Consistent fee structures across programs would also reduce administrative burdens and foster trust among participating families.

4. Enhanced Accessibility for Families

Adjusting the eligibility date and sliding fee scale together would ensure that more families, particularly those with limited income or children with unique developmental timelines, can fully participate in the program. These changes would make the program more inclusive and adaptable to the needs of diverse communities, ensuring a greater positive impact for all participants.

Closing

On behalf of the YMCA of the Northern Sky, I strongly encourage you to continue funding the Best-in-Class program. It is an investment in our children, families, and workforce—one that pays dividends for the entire state of North Dakota. Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,

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