

TESTIMONY ON HB 1416
HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE
March 10, 2021
By: Dr. Janelle Ferderer, Director
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Chairperson and Members of the Committee:

My name is Dr. Janelle Ferderer. I have been an educator and practitioner in Early Childhood Education for 32 years. I am currently the Director of Special Education for the South Central Prairie Special Education Unit, serving 11 rural school districts in south central North Dakota. I am providing testimony today in opposition of HB 1416, a bill for an Act to move program approval for early childhood education from the Department of Public Instruction to the Department of Human Services.

There are many questions in the field as to how this would benefit young children in North Dakota. There may, in fact, be benefits, however the lack of stakeholder input and sharing of information before bringing this bill forward has created a sense of uncertainty for many of us in the field of education.

In my 32 years of experience I have worked with many different models, and partnerships in early education. School districts have been required to provide needed services to children with disabilities ages 3-21 since the passing of Public Law 94-142 in 1975, and yes, there have been challenges. Schools have partnered with Head Start, Developmental Disabilities, Vocational Rehabilitation, Community Daycares, parents, the Department of Commerce, private agencies and many other programs to achieve quality programs and services for our young children, with and without disabilities.

In 2013 the 63rd Legislative Assembly passed SB 2229, which provided a means for school districts to obtain approval of four-year-old programs through the Department of Public Instruction. I stood with Superintendent Baesler in advocating for this change and since that time many school districts have developed and implemented these programs. We are seeing more successful transitions to kindergarten, higher achievement levels, decreased referrals for remediation and increased investment from parents and communities to support early learning. We have learned that investments made at the 3 to 5-year-old level provide an exponential return. These programs not “mission creep,” for educators to gain access to younger and younger children, but part of the Federal Law and mission of supporting young children and their families.

I realize that our systems are not perfect, and much could be done to increase services and benefits to families and children. The Department of Human Services may turn out to be the eventual lead department, however, more research is needed before that decision is made. I would posit that creating the law first and later trying to figure out all of the implications for children and families is “putting the cart before the horse.” Our children and families are in crisis right now, as are individuals, agencies and programs trying to serve them. It is not the right time to introduce an additional layer of uncertainty and confusion.

My recommendation is for the committee to conduct a study of how this change would impact children and families, involve appropriate stakeholders, and revisit this topic in the next Legislative Assembly. Successful leadership is not conducted from the top down, but initiated thoughtfully, with the input of those who will be affected most, children and families, and the programs designed to serve them.

Thank you Chairperson and Members of the Committee, this concludes my testimony.