



March 6, 2024

Proponent Testimony House Bill No. 2785

Committee on Commerce, Labor, and Economic Development

Chairman Tarwater, Vice Chair Borjon, Ranking Member Probst, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill No. 2785. My name is Cornelia Stevens and I am the Executive Director of TOP Early Learning Centers in Wichita, KS. I also served as Co-Chair of the Governor's Early Childhood Transition Task Force.

TOP's mission is to provide a high-quality early learning experience to children living in poverty, providing them the tools needed for emotional, academic, and lifelong success. TOP operates three centers in Wichita's low-income neighborhoods, educating 600 children each year.

Our programs interface with four different state agencies. We receive funding from the Kansas Department of Education, Kansas Department for Children and Families and the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund and are licensed by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. Working with each of these four agencies creates unnecessary burdens and bureaucratic mazes that we must navigate to provide basic services. Consolidating the early childhood functions of these four agencies into the Office of Early Childhood would better serve programs like ours.

During my time as co-chair of the task force, I had the privilege of attending 8 of the 9 community listening sessions where over 500 Kansas shared their thoughts about our early childhood system in Kansas. Participants from all nine locations stressed that it is difficult to navigate the various programs and find needed information. Families reported that programs do not communicate with one another to offer a cohesive system and that state employees often do not have the correct information to guide them through the complicated system.

House Bill 2785 provides us with an opportunity to generate positive outcomes for families and better support the private sector in expanding access to care. I urge you to support Bill No. 2785 and other efforts to make high-quality child care accessible to all Kansans. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Cornelia Stevens

Executive Director