
Testimony of Barry Downing, President of Northrock Inc.

House Bill No. 2785

Committee on Commerce, Labor, and Economic Development

March 6, 2024

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 Barry Downing. I am a Kansas businessperson and president of Northrock, Inc. Northrock is based in Wichita with subsidiary companies in the oil and gas, hotel management, and real estate development industries. My family also maintains a charitable endowment that supports numerous Kansas community causes. These organizations in total employ approximately 160 people in Kansas.

In 2003, my family and I founded The Opportunity Project (TOP Early Learning Centers) with the mission of delivering “a high-quality early learning experience to children living in poverty, providing them the tools needed for emotional, academic, and lifelong success.” TOP now operates three centers in Wichita’s low-income neighborhoods, educating 600 children each year. Longitudinal studies have shown that TOP students perform better than their counterparts throughout the entirety of their educational journey—a testament to the importance of early childhood education for the future success of Kansas kids, our workforce, and economy.

In operating the programs provided at TOP Early Learning Centers, our programs interface with four different state agencies. We receive funding from the Kansas State Department of Education, the Kansas Department for Children and Families, and the Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund. TOP Early Learning Centers are also 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 and empower businesspeople and philanthropy to deeply engage in the state’s early childhood system by providing a clear partner to work with in support of our children and families.

It’s been well-documented over the past year how difficult it is for families and providers to navigate the fragmentation of Kansas’ early childhood system. I can attest that this sentiment is shared by leaders in the business community, philanthropy, and our chambers of commerce. The private sector has shown a strong commitment to early childhood care and has stepped up to provide greater support for their communities and workforces through the creation of innovative

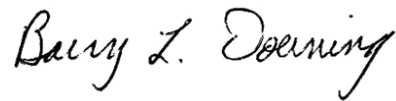
approaches to expanding access to care. Far too often, these business leaders are looking for partners at the state-level, but the lack of clear authority and ownership of the issue of early childhood makes it difficult for the business community to develop sustainable partnerships with the State. By establishing a one-stop shop like the Office of Early Childhood, business and philanthropy would be empowered to fulfil our shared goals of developing public-private partnerships and leveraging private funding for the delivery of early childhood care and education services.

As a businessperson, I have been a longtime advocate of early education. I have seen firsthand the economic effect high-quality childhood education has on our families, businesses and communities, and I believe it offers the best return on investment strategy for our economy. When parents do not have access to affordable, consistent care, we all suffer. 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 now or in the future.

Sincerely,

Barry Downing

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Barry L. Downing". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Northrock, Inc.

bdowning@northrockinc.com