

Written Testimony  
HB 2294  
House Commerce, Labor and Economic Development Committee  
February 27, 2025

Chair Tarwater and Members of the Committee,

**I am pleased to provide written testimony in support of House Bill 2294 to streamline regulatory structures and reorganize existing programs into an Office of Early Childhood.**

Over the years, the Kansas Legislature has demonstrated bipartisan support for children and families in many ways. Sometimes it has provided public funding to support needed services. Other times it has worked to eliminate red tape that can make it difficult for families to access the services they need, and difficult for providers to deliver those services. Today's legislation is in the latter category. This bill will unify our state's oversight of child care, home visiting, Head Start collaboration, and related services, bringing parts of four different state agencies, including the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund, into an Office of Early Childhood. The bill will also reduce fees for child care providers and reduce the number of state agencies providers and families alike would have to interact with, whether it is a provider applying for a grant or a family trying to enroll in the services they seek.

This legislation is beneficial to Kansas children and families. In 2023, the Kansas Early Childhood Transition Task Force issued a set of recommendations for the future of Kansas's early childhood system. As part of its work, the Task Force held public listening sessions across the state, and heard from families, early childhood providers, business leaders, public officials and more. This feedback identified multiple ongoing issues with our state's early childhood system. Those included:

- Burdens on providers created by overlapping requirements in state programs providing similar services.
- Challenges coordinating among service providers.
- Lack of clear lines of authority.
- Inadequate data across services.
- Misalignments in workforce policy.
- A lack of support for providers.
- State funding streams that are not optimized toward common goals.
- Public confusion over which agencies are responsible for which services.
- And, parent frustration with how hard it is to find the services they need.

With programs and services spread across four state agencies, no single agency has the authority to make the pieces fit, and the providers themselves do not have the capacity or ability to change the nature of their funding. Families end up stuck in the middle of this bureaucratic maze. But we can do better, and that's what this legislation is all about.

Unifying the governance of early childhood in Kansas is a form of customer service, and an important one for families and providers. **We know that families are not out there thinking about different state or federal funding streams or state agencies – they are thinking about their child, and what their child needs.** They then must try to find those services from the many providers who make up our state early childhood system, which can be really complicated. Too often, families do not have good information about their options, nor do they have the time or resources to go out and find what they need.

Families with young children are a core part of our state's economy and our future. We need an agency set up to effectively meet their needs. This bill will realign and reorganize the universe of existing early childhood programs and services into the Office of Early Childhood to more easily connect families to the services they want and need, and simplify things for the providers of those services.

Legislators expect public money to be distributed in an efficient manner, with strong budgeting practices and they expect state agencies to provide consistent definitions of quality, and then offer support to the private providers seeking to deliver on those definitions. Legislators also expect state agencies to listen to families and make the system easier for them to navigate, including by communicating what options families have available. By reorganizing the programs outlined in this bill into one place, the Office will better serve the needs of legislators by providing a single pathway for constituent concerns, one point of contact for lawmakers, providers and the public, and better accountability through more streamlined reporting.

At the Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund, we share those expectations, however we know that in reality, it is very difficult to meet them when responsibility for the work is spread across four different agencies. **Having a single Office of Early Childhood with clear lines of authority and clear accountability will make the system more transparent and easier to understand for legislators, providers, and families.**

Kansas was a pioneer in establishing a comprehensive system to support children's needs – as both the first state in the nation to establish a Children's Trust Fund in 1980, and the first state in the nation to devote our state share of the Master Tobacco Settlement funds towards meeting the needs of children and families with the statutory establishment of the Kansas Children's Cabinet in 1999 (K.S.A. 38-1901 and 38-2101 through 38-2105). However, we have not yet organized our early childhood services in a manner that allows us to manage those services holistically. That is what this legislation would accomplish.

In the last 20 years, roughly half the states have chosen to unify their governance of early childhood. States with ambitious goals for their early childhood system have realized that it

is much harder to reach those goals when there is no single office responsible for providing leadership on the issue.

One of the first states to unify early childhood governance was Georgia, which passed legislation in 2004 signed by then-Governor Sonny Perdue. Since then, more than 24 states have unified early childhood governance in some way, including Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and the District of Columbia. It has looked a little different in all of those states, but the basic idea has been the same: having programs and services spread across multiple agencies means less accountability, more redundancy and overlap in regulations, and less ability to meet the needs of families.

It's important to emphasize three key points:

- This bill does not make government bigger, it simply reorganizes existing functions;
- This bill does not add any new services; and
- This bill does not give state government any new power that it does not have already.

What this bill does offer is a better, smarter, more efficient and more effective approach to state government. By unifying core programs and services in one place, we can reduce the red tape that creates unnecessary barriers for families just trying to give their children the best possible start in life.

**At the heart of this bill is the simple idea that the people who matter most to children are parents and families.** We want to make sure parents of children birth to five have good choices available to them – and the support to find the services that meet their needs. We want an Office that is responsible for supporting families and helping providers to deliver the services families want.

The Children's Cabinet itself has recommended that the Governor and Legislature work together to unify the governance of early childhood programs and services, including options that:

- fully realize the Kansas Children's Cabinet's statutory role as outlined in K.S.A. 38-1901;
- retain the Kansas Children's Cabinet governing board oversight of the CIF as outlined in K.S.A. 38-2103;
- Retain the role of the Kansas Children's Cabinet governing board as grant maker for existing CIF grant programs or new grant programs that may be developed and administered by the unified entity as directed by the Executive Director of the Office of Early Childhood;
- Retain the role of the Kansas Children's Cabinet as the state's Early Childhood Advisory Council in accordance with the federal Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 (Kansas Executive order 20-02); and,

- Establish methods of collaboration and coordination between the Children's Cabinet board and the unified entity's administrative leadership.

Accordingly, the Children's Cabinet stands ready to embrace a new chapter in early childhood governance in Kansas. We are excited about the opportunity to take this necessary next step to realize our goal of providing a clear, coherent path for families to connect to the services their children need, to help reduce the burden on the professionals working tirelessly to provide these services, and to ensure that state government operates as efficiently and effectively as possible in the early childhood sector.

In conclusion, when it comes to early childhood, we have come a long way in Kansas. But what we learned through the Task Force in 2023 is that if we want to go further, we're going to have to do some things differently. That is what this legislation will allow us to do.

Thank you for the chance to submit written testimony in **support of HB 2294**.