

Proponent Testimony on HB 2294

House Committee on Commerce, Labor, and Economic Development

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Office of Governor Laura Kelly

Chairman Tarwater and Members of the Committee—

Thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony in support of HB 2294, which represents bipartisan early childhood legislation reached in compromise with members of the 2025 Kansas Legislature. While I appear today to provide testimony on behalf of Governor Laura Kelly, my testimony represents the sentiments of the entire Kelly Administration including the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, the Kansas Department for Children and Families, and the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund. Each of these agencies has also submitted written proponent testimony speaking to HB 2294's impact on their agencies and the state's early childhood system.

The bill before you today is the culmination of years of effort by our Administration, the Legislature, and stakeholders to create a system of early childhood care and education that makes Kansas the best state in the country to live, work, and raise a family. Essential to delivering economic prosperity and giving our youngest Kansas the best chance for lifelong success is cultivating a thriving early childhood care and education system where affordable, high-quality care is assessable, where business and industry have an environment to recruit and retain workers, and where early childhood educators have the resources to build sustainable businesses. Unfortunately, for far too long, Kansas's early childhood system has been constrained by a governance system that is inefficient, fragmented, and burdensome for those working to navigate it.

This bill is a step towards reforming that system into one where licensing and regulatory structures are streamlined, programs and services are consolidated for more efficient delivery, and families, providers, and communities are better supported in their efforts to access, provide, and expand high-quality early childhood care and education.

History and Background

Kansas has longstanding commitment to early childhood care and education, with roots reaching back nearly fifty years. In 1980, Kansas became the first state to establish a children's trust fund, which would later be transformed into the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund we know today. From the earliest conception, this agency was tasked with managing the annual payments from the Tobacco Master Settlement, implementing a coordinated early childhood system, and aligning interagency collaboration. Over this period, other state agencies began to establish their own

footprint in the early childhood system—including KDHE, DCF, and the Kansas State Department of Education. The expansion of programming across these agencies created a siloed system of governance where driving comprehensive service delivery became increasingly difficult due to duplication of work, overlapping authorities, and bureaucratic redundancies—all making it nearly impossible for families and communities to work with the state to support the growth of early childhood care and education opportunities.

The concepts included in this bill are not novel or new. Since the early 2000s, proposals to reform the early childhood system and consolidate programming were considered by multiple administrations and the Legislature. In 2019, following the awarding of the federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five from the Trump Administration to Kansas, our state began to reinstate conversations about how we could reform our system to better serve Kansans.

Throughout 2019, leaders travelled across the state to hear directly from Kansans about their needs and worked to develop a strategic plan to guide the interagency delivery of services. Key findings from that tour that showed families and communities lacked access to services, were required to adopt a “connect the dots” approach to navigating state bureaucracy and suffered from a lack of a robust early childhood workforce.

In 2023, Governor Kelly signed Executive Order 23-01 establishing the Early Childhood Transition Task Force. The Task Force was charged with reviewing our current early childhood system, speaking to communities about their needs, and developing a roadmap for the consolidation of services. This Task Force represented a bipartisan group of early childhood service providers, business leaders, parents, legislators, and advocates. At the conclusion of their work, the Task Force delivered a report calling for the consolidation of state early childhood functions into a one-stop shop for families and communities.

During the 2024 Legislative Session, the Governor’s Office collaborated with legislators from both parties and both chambers to develop a proposal that addressed system-level challenges Kansans experience and streamline existing regulatory structures to expand access to services. After significant collaboration and negotiation, the parties involved came to a bipartisan compromise agreement. That agreement was inserted into 2024 SB 96 and considered by the Legislature. The agreement passed the House of Representatives 110-10, but was not acted upon by the Senate before the session’s adjournment.

The major elements of that agreement are before you today in House Bill 2294.

The Current Early Childhood Landscape

Despite significant efforts to improve coordination across agencies, Kansas’s early childhood system is not structurally equipped to address the needs of the state and strategically expand access to care. Currently, four different state agencies work on issues relating to early childhood care and education

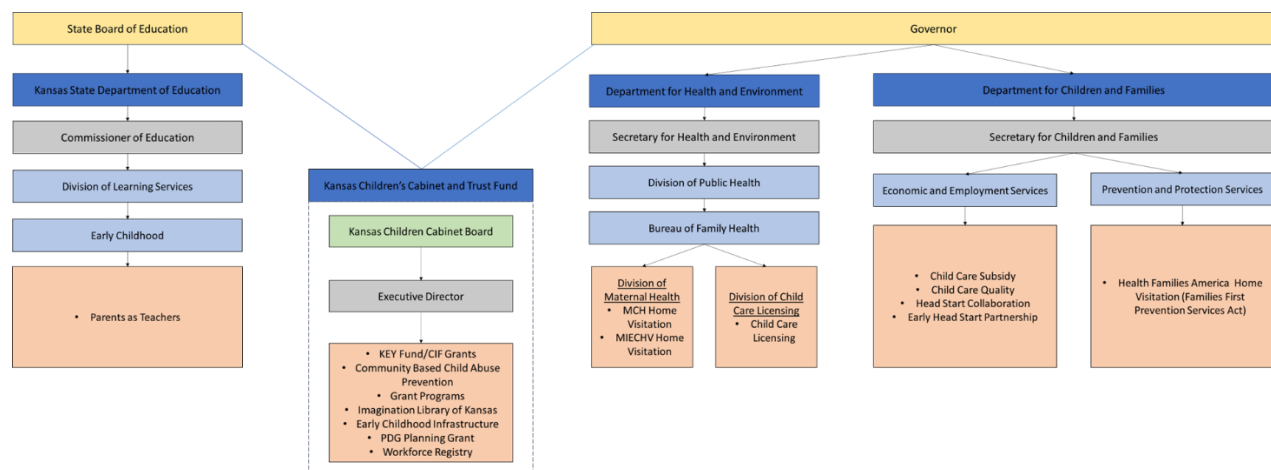
or oversee programs supporting our youngest Kansans. This structure creates a series of bureaucratic mazes that make collaboration more difficult and government less efficient.

With the administration of these programs spread over four different state agencies, there is no single authority tasked with providing the strategic vision required to ensure that state is achieving outcomes that improve the lives of Kansans. The structure of this system:

- Places burdens on providers by creating overlapping requirements for programs that provide similar services and duplicating reporting and compliance standards
- Requires state agencies to coordinate efforts, creating inefficiencies like duplication of operating processes and procedures (Ex: multiple legal and fiscal review of program funding, establishment of MOUs, transfer of funds from one agency to another)
- Lacks a clear line of authority and accountability
- Prevents accountability and a holistic accounting of the state's work and funding of early childhood programs
- Creates public confusion over which agency is responsible for each service, leaving to providers and families to navigate a bureaucratic maze
- Lacks organized funding streams that are optimized toward common goals
- Duplicates oversight on providers from multiple state agencies

The organizational chart below outlines the current structure of the state's early childhood system. As evident by this chart, there are multiple layers of bureaucracy preventing effective collaboration and communication between these programs. Imagine being a provider or a parent trying to navigate this structure to receive state support and identify what program is best suited to address their needs.

Current Early Childhood System Structure



Kansas will never fully solve our child care crisis with a system beleaguered by inefficiencies and bureaucratic structures that inhibit the execution of a statewide strategic plan to expand access and cut costs for families.

HB 2294

The Kelly Administration stands in strong support of HB 2294. This bill will reduce regulatory and bureaucratic burdens placed on providers, ensure a more efficient early childhood system, and expand access to care for Kansas in every corner of the state. Ultimately, this bill will allow more Kansans to join and remain in the workforce, creating greater economic growth for our state. The bipartisan agreement contained in HB 2294 balances safety and efficiency, which will ensure our children are cared for in nurturing, safe environments and that our early childhood service providers are able to operate with less red tape.

Streamlining Licensure and Regulatory Processes:

First, the bill streamlines child care licensure and regulatory structures by outlining in statute the requirements for various early childhood educator positions. These provisions specify the requirements for child care program directors, lead teachers, and assistant teachers and more clearly illustrate how providers can advance in their career. Additionally, this bill allows for the creation of programs that pilot new and innovative approaches to licensing categories, like the creation of small centers, that will allow the state to expand capacity and meet additional demand. Finally, the bill supports the early childhood workforce by eliminating fees related to licensure, lowering the financial barriers to starting a child care business or becoming licensed.

HB 2294 works to standardize the licensing and surveying process for providers. The clearer language concerning professional qualifications and other industry standards will work to remove confusion that may exist when providers join the industry. Additionally, the bill creates a surveyor certification program that will ensure more standard implementation of regulations and serve to support providers in their efforts. These provisions will also create more accountability in surveying by providing early childhood educators with an easier process for redressing surveying issues and providing feedback that can be implemented in surveyor training programs.

Finally, these provisions would allow the child care regulatory agency to waive provisions of the law regarding regulations and licensure requirements for a certain period of time. This will allow for additional flexibility in the licensure process and ensure that the agency has the tools needed to ease the process for becoming a provider.

Governance Consolidation:

This bill unifies the state's early childhood care and education programs into the Kansas Office of Early Childhood. Under this plan, the Children's Cabinet will become a designated subdivision of the Office of Early Childhood. The current statutory functions of the Children's Cabinet Board will be retained, and the identified existing programs related to child care, home visitation, and Head Start

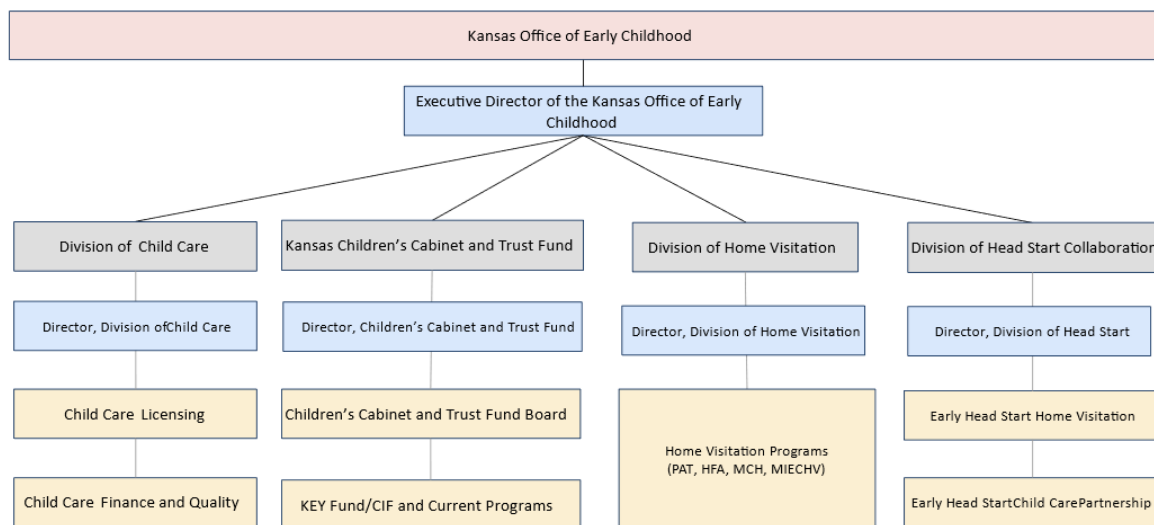
programming (currently at Kansas Department of Health and Environment, the Kansas Department for Children and Families, and the Kansas State Department of Education) will be moved into the Office of Early Childhood.

The Office of Early Childhood will serve as a one-stop shop for all things early childhood care and education. By unifying these services in one existing agency, the state will be able to streamline processes and reduce burdens placed on families, providers, communities, and businesses that are currently forced to navigate four different state agencies to receive the support they need. This realignment will increase government accountability for early childhood by aligning budgetary structures for all early childhood programs and allowing for better tracking of expenditures and their impacts. The Office of Early Childhood will reduce the red tape required to access services and enhance the mixed delivery system that is currently driven by what's best for parents and children. Reforming Kansas' oversight of these programs will eliminate duplication and overlap of work that currently exists across state agencies and ensure that state government is more efficiently supporting Kansas children, families, and service providers.

It is important to note that:

- This proposal is state agency neutral, given it will envelop the functions of the Children's Cabinet. The bill does not grow the total number of state agencies.
- The bill requires the addition of only one new FTE.
- This bill does not add any new services or expand the scope or funding of current programming.
- This bill does not provide state government any new power or oversight functions. All functions included in the legislation currently exist across the existing agencies.

Proposed Early Childhood System Structure



What this bill does do is create a more efficient, effective approach to early childhood care and education programs. The changes proposed in this legislation will ensure that children have the opportunities to receive high-quality care and education services. This legislation will better support providers of these services by ensuring they don't have as many hoops to jump through or red tape to navigate when operating. Overall, the bill will ensure that our communities have a willing and able partner in state government who is prepared to support the expansion of early childhood care and education programs, no matter the type of program.

Conclusion

While I know you will consider many bills this session, I would argue that there is no bill more important to increasing government efficiency and supporting economic development than HB 2294. If enacted, this legislation will increase accountability and cut red tape, better support families businesses in accessing services for their children and workforces, and improve the quality of care provided to our children. This is truly a transformational piece of legislation that will move our state forward and better support our future generations.

This bill also represents the best of what makes us Kansans: our ability to come together to solve challenges. If you ask anyone involved, there are elements of this bill that are more exciting than others. But the essence of compromise is the willingness to give a little to get a little. While no piece of legislation is perfect, this bill is an example of how we all can better serve Kansans—leaders from both sides of the aisle putting politics aside to address real policy issues through collaboration, good faith negotiation, and compromise.

I urge your support of HB 2294 and appreciate your commitment to early childhood issues in our state.