



March 6, 2024

Heather Schrotberger, Executive Director
Kansas Head Start Association
Written-Only Proponent Testimony for HB 2785
Commerce, Labor and Economic Development

Chairman Tarwater and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony in support of HB 2785, which unifies many early childhood programs and services under the Office of Early Childhood.

The Kansas Head Start Association (KHSa), a not-for-profit organization, represents 26 Head Start programs in Kansas. Head Start programs provide services in the majority of Kansas counties, employing nearly 2,400 members of the Kansas early childhood workforce and offering comprehensive early education services to more than 6,200 young children and their families. Head Start services in Kansas include Early Head Start home visiting for infants and toddlers, Early Head Start center-based services (child care) for infants and toddlers, and Head Start preschool services. All programs focus on high quality early education and comprehensive family engagement.

I have worked in the Kansas early childhood field for nearly 25 years. In my current role as Executive Director of KHSa, I connect Head Start programs, leaders, and staff to resources and opportunities that support and enhance services to young children and their families. I visit regularly with program directors about their program successes and challenges and to better understand the experiences of the children and families they serve. I am also a former Early Head Start director, which gives me a great deal of respect and appreciation for the hard work of early education programs and providers across our state. Additionally, I had the honor to serve as a member of the Kansas Early Childhood Transition Task Force last year.

KHSa supports the proposed consolidation of existing early childhood programs because we recognize the positive impact that a unified structure would have for early childhood programs, for families with young children, and for the early childhood workforce.

Early Childhood Programs

KHSa and the Head Start programs we represent are committed to partnership and collaboration with our early childhood colleagues, both in local communities and in the state early childhood system, to meet the needs of families with young children. As one Head Start staff member recently shared with me: "Head Start staff are determined to work alongside fellow early childhood programs in the communities to collaborate and best serve the children in the area. If all programs work together, our communities can thrive and all children will receive high-quality early education".



Early childhood programs, however, including Head Start programs, currently receive oversight, guidance, and resources from multiple state departments, an unnecessary complication on a daily basis. Unified governance of the Kansas early childhood system would streamline these interactions, resulting in a more cohesive system within which programs operate.

Families with Young Children

Head Start programs serve infants, toddlers, and preschoolers and their families. KHSB advocates for a strong early childhood system in which all Kansas families with young children can access services and resources that promote the healthy growth and development of children, that support parents in nurturing caring for their children, and that provide opportunities for strengthening family well-being. A Head Start staff member recently shared a sentiment that is true of programs within the early childhood sector: “We have the opportunity to support families in reaching their goals. [We] provide support to parents in navigating the challenges of parenting. [We] provide children with experiences and opportunities to grow and learn along with their peers and their family”.

I was recently visiting with parents in our KHSB parent network, and they shared the challenges that they or other families in their community have experienced in navigating the existing early childhood system. They were quick to note the appreciation they have for the child care and home visiting services they have participated in as parents of young children, but they also shared that not all families are able to connect with these services that would benefit their families. Their sentiments echo the issues raised by stakeholders during the Early Childhood Transition Task Force process. KHSB believes that unification at the state level, through the proposed Office of Early Childhood, would result in a system that is easier for providers and the families they serve to navigate in local communities.

Early Childhood Workforce

Like our early childhood colleagues across the Kansas early childhood system, the Head Start workforce is comprised of knowledgeable and experienced individuals who are committed, on a daily basis, to assuring children and families have the greatest opportunity possible to succeed. The Head Start workforce in Kansas includes early educators, child care providers, and home visitors. When asked why they enjoy their jobs, one Head Start staff member shared: “I love to make a difference in the lives of children, which will also have a large impact on our community”. Another indicated: “It’s an opportunity to positively impact an entire family”. KHSB supports the proposed unification to strengthen the recruitment, retention, and support of a strong early childhood workforce comprised of individuals with this type of dedication and passion for working with young children and families.

Thank you for your consideration. A thriving early childhood system is critical for children and families in our communities, including the many children and families participating annually in Head Start services. A thriving system makes it more likely that all families have an opportunity to thrive, which in turn means greater opportunity for our youngest Kansans to thrive.

If I can be of further assistance, please contact me at hschrotberger@ksheadstart.org.