

**TESTIMONY SUBMITTED BY DR. SAMUEL J. MEISELS,
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**Education Committee Hearing - Nebraska Legislature
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Chairman Groene and Honorable Members of the Education Committee:

My name is Samuel Meisels. I am the founding executive director of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today about two provisions that I take exception to in the proposed legislation, LB 803: the elimination of credential requirements for early childhood teachers and the provision that allows elementary schools to enroll 5-year-olds in early childhood programs.

First, certification. My good friend, Senator Stinner, has spoken in favor of eliminating the statute requiring early childhood teacher certification as a solution to the shortage of certified teachers in state-funded early childhood programs. With all due respect, I profoundly disagree with this proposal and do so based on my experience and knowledge of early childhood development and my understanding that there are other available solutions to this problem that stop short of removing the certification requirement from state statute.

In my view, removing the certification requirement for early childhood teachers would move the state in the wrong direction and produce a number of unintended negative consequences with harmful effects on young children.

Here are my reasons for opposing this provision of LB 803.

To begin, although data from the Nebraska Department of Education indicate that certified early childhood teachers are in short supply, particularly in rural parts of the state, the problem is not with certification. **It is with the overall shortage of teachers in the early childhood workforce.**

The teacher shortage in early childhood is a symptom of several crucial issues that have been ignored too long. These include low pay, poor working conditions and benefits, difficulty in obtaining certificates, narrow perspectives on certification, and costs of enrollment in higher education. The way to help our children and communities is to begin a process of correcting these issues, not ignoring them or making them worse.

Please recall that our current system of professional credentialing in early childhood relies on teacher certification at the bachelor's degree level. This system, which serves as a proxy for career readiness, while imperfect, is the best accountability system available for ensuring that professionals have the knowledge and skills that current science tells us is best for our youngest children.

Start early. Start well.

Requiring early childhood teachers to be certified by the State of Nebraska ensures that those teaching our youngest children meet the same standards as those teaching older students.

While some may argue that teacher certification is less important in early childhood than it is for teachers in the K-12 system, I am here to tell you that this is a fallacy.

The early years are a period of intense and rapid neurological development. Eighty percent of all neural connections are in place by age 3. But a child's ability to take advantage of these connections is highly dependent on his or her environment and the adults in that environment. Through no fault of their own, up to one quarter of Nebraska children start off well behind their age-mates because of the economic circumstances of their families. Early intervention can level the playing field for children like these and can change their life chances and trajectory. However, **none of this will happen by reducing the qualifications of the early childhood workforce.**

A skilled and informed professional can have a positive impact on a child's life from birth onwards. Conversely, a poorly prepared educator or caregiver can limit or even damage a child's development. If we do not ensure that early childhood professionals possess the knowledge, skills, and credentials to teach, we fail to ensure that all of Nebraska's children will have the skills necessary for school and life success.

Moreover, removing certification may produce several unintended negative consequences. Among these are the potential to further suppress salaries for early childhood professionals already earning poverty-level wages; problems with future recruitment of individuals into the field; leeway for administrators to hire teacher candidates with lower qualifications; and the likelihood of additional requests for similar accommodations and changes to certification requirements in other professional fields.

I recognize and agree that the lack of certified teachers has practical implications for state-funded early childhood programs. However, removing credentials is not the answer.

I respectfully request that the Committee forgo consideration of the proposed change in statute so that stakeholders statewide can work together to create a consensus about how to move forward. I propose that the *Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission* serve this purpose. First convened in 2016, the Workforce Commission is a statewide group of 40 public- and private-sector leaders with a commitment to and knowledge about early childhood. Senator Stinner serves on the commission, as do senior leaders from the Nebraska Department of Education, the State Board of Education, and others from across the state, including those from rural areas deeply impacted by these issues. As co-chair of the commission with Dr. Marjorie Kostelnik, I am willing to commit myself to lead this process and prepare a report for lawmakers with actionable solutions within the next 9 – 12 months. I am including with my testimony a short paper entitled *Credentialing the Early Childhood Workforce in Nebraska* that proposes a set of eight possible solutions to assist the commission in its discussions.

The bottom line? Removing certification, while well-intentioned, will create more problems than it will solve. Rather, please allow us to take time to work collaboratively and get this right. The stakes are too high for our children, families, and communities.

Speaking of high stakes, this brings me to the second provision of LB 803 that I take exception to: the enrollment of 5-year olds in Pre-K programs. In the field we call this "holding out"; it's also known as "redshirting." Its purpose is to give children—typically boys—more time to grow and become ready for the academic demands of Kindergarten.

Here are the problems with it. First, it pits the desires of parents of 5-year olds against the needs of parents of 3-year olds because for every kindergarten-eligible child enrolled in Pre-K there will be less room for 3-year olds who are already underrepresented in early childhood programs. Second, it confounds age and development, assuming that if a child is older, he will be able to learn better, faster, or more. But research shows that development surpasses age in importance; not the other way around. Studies show that the independent effects of schooling are four times greater than those of age. Any advantage conferred by chronological age at entrance to first grade is lost within a few years.

Perhaps the most important issue is that holding out sets up a pernicious cycle of increased academic demands where parents who have held out their children because of concerns about their readiness bring their 6-year olds to Kindergarten the next year with even higher expectations about what the curriculum should consist of. This is not only a problem for children who were not held out, it is especially problematic to those with any type of learning difficulty. If a Kindergarten-eligible child is not ready for a particular Kindergarten curriculum, that classroom needs to adapt to the needs of that child, not the other way around.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts with you about this extremely consequential set of issues. I will be glad to respond to questions and concerns that you may have.

Editor's Note: The Buffett Early Childhood Institute has authored a paper on certification for the early childhood workforce in the state. To view, visit <http://bit.ly/2n51o75>.