

TESTIMONY OF DR. SAMUEL J. MEISELS, FOUNDING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,

BUFFETT EARLY CHILDHOOD INSTITUTE

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

EDUCATION COMMITTEE HEARING

NEBRASKA LEGISLATURE

January 19, 2016

Madam Chair and Honorable Members of the Education Committee:

My name is Samuel Meisels and I am the founding executive director of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska. It is my privilege to appear before you today to speak on behalf of LB 773, a bill to create an early childhood workforce development task force. In my comments today I will not only be representing my opinions; at his request, I will also be representing the position of the president of the University of Nebraska, President Hank Bounds.

I want to begin by thanking Senator Stinner of Gering for introducing this important legislation. In my remarks today I will make three points. First, I will make it clear why the early childhood workforce is so important to children's development; second, I will explain why it is essential to enhance, enlarge, and improve the workforce at this time; and third, I will tell you why the Buffett Institute is committed to this legislation and to what it will make possible.

The early childhood workforce is essential to creating quality classrooms and environments for young children. Research tells us that the quality of the teacher or caregiver predicts the quality of children's learning from birth through Grade 3. Well-prepared teachers are able not only to help children acquire vocabulary, learn to do math, and read and write. They also enable children to develop curiosity, communicate and cooperate, and acquire the capacity to regulate their emotions and solve problems. We have strong evidence that children whose teachers know how to help them succeed in kindergarten are more likely to go to college than children from similar backgrounds who do not have high quality teachers. What's more, those who are exposed to good teaching are less likely to become single parents and more likely to save more for retirement and earn more money across their lifespans.

That's the first reason for supporting this taskforce: high-quality teachers increase the probability of high-quality learning.

The second reason is the crisis we are facing in the early childhood workforce right now. We estimate that at least 100,000 children age 8 and younger in Nebraska are at risk for failing in school. According to First Five Nebraska, nearly half of these children—those who are younger than age 5—do not have access to a quality early childhood program.

First Five Nebraska estimates that the state needs more than 7,900 highly qualified early childhood professionals to serve the growing population of vulnerable young children. This perception is shared not only by researchers and educators. Recently, we completed a survey with Gallup of a representative sample of the Nebraska state population. We will be releasing results from this survey in the next few weeks, but I want to share one finding with you now. When we asked respondents about their perceptions of the quality of the early childhood workforce in their area, fewer than one in five Nebraska residents (17%) strongly agreed that the caregivers in their area are highly qualified. This

percentage did not vary significantly by urban location, large town, or rural area. In another survey that we are in the process of completing, 69% of early childhood center directors said they had difficulty filling open positions because candidates did not have the credentials or experience needed.

That's the second reason for supporting this bill: The state desperately needs more highly qualified early care and education professionals.

The third reason is that we at the Buffett Institute are in an excellent position to do something about this. When I accepted the position of founding executive director of the Institute in 2013 I convened a group of stakeholders to help me identify the priorities they thought we should devote ourselves to. We selected two priorities that have become our signature programs. One we call the Achievement Gap Challenge; the other is early childhood workforce development. We need the second in order to accomplish the first. In other words, if we do not enhance the quality, quantity, and skills of the workforce, we will not be able to reduce the gap in achievement between children with few resources in their lives as compared to those with more.

Since 2013 the Buffett Institute has completed an inventory of all public and private universities, 2- and 4-year colleges, and undergraduate and graduate programs in order to describe the landscape of professional preparation programs at the associate, bachelor, masters, and doctoral levels. We also developed and are in the process of completing a survey of a representative cross-section of teachers and early childhood caregivers across the state to establish baseline data regarding the workforce. And finally, last October we held a first-ever conference for higher education faculty statewide. Twenty-two of the 24 Nebraska institutions of higher education that prepare early childhood and early elementary educators came together in Lincoln for a day and a half of discussion, presentations, and intensive workshops. Those attending obtained a new perspective on the need to transform the early childhood workforce in Nebraska.

In short, the Buffett Institute views the early childhood workforce as a critical part of its workscope. For this reason, among others, we are willing to undertake the responsibility to raise funds to support the taskforce that LB 773 will bring into existence. Our commitment is clear. The goals spelled out in the bill are of great significance. I ask each of you for your support. Early childhood development is critical to the growth of young people in this state and to the well-being of all our citizens. Improving the workforce is essential for making this a reality.