

Testimony for the
House Commerce, Labor and Economic Development Committee
March 6, 2024

Chair Tarwater and Members of the Committee,

I am pleased to testify today in support of House Bill 2785 and the Governor's proposal to reorganize existing programs into an Office of Early Childhood.

Over the years, the Kansas Legislature has demonstrated its support for children and families in many ways - sometimes providing public funding to support needed services, other times working 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.

I want to focus on why this legislation is beneficial to Kansas children and families. Last year, 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, as well as 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 they 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 state 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 20 states

have unified early childhood governance in some way, including Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Missouri, New Mexico, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina. 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;
- 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 goals of unifying governance are clear, and there are important reasons that this bill proposes to unify governance around the Kansas Children's Cabinet. Our mission is clearly articulated in existing state statute. According to K.S.A. 38-1901, the Kansas Children's Cabinet is directed to assist the governor in developing and implementing a coordinated, comprehensive service delivery system to serve the children & families of Kansas through better coordination across departmental and agency boundaries. Additional requirements in our organizing statutes direct the Children's Cabinet to review, assess, & evaluate all uses of money in the Children's Initiatives Fund (CIF) and advise the governor and the legislature regarding the uses of moneys credited to the CIF.

Since the outset, strict accountability has been part of the plan for CIF. An annual evaluation process (K.S.A. 38-2103) offers a complete look at how programs serve children and families across the state. Our accountability framework is required of all recipients of CIF funds, and the Common Measures Initiative (CMI) is a condition of receiving funding through the Early Childhood Block Grant. In 2014, the Cabinet debuted the "Blueprint for Early Childhood" which we continue to follow today. The Blueprint focuses on three key categories – Healthy Development, Strong Families, and Early Learning. Cabinet decisions align with the core principles outlined in our Blueprint, and in accordance with state statute, are evidence-based and data-driven thanks to our accountability process.

Currently, the Cabinet leads the cross-agency collaboration between the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), Department for Children and Families (DCF), and Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE), funded by a federal grant, the Preschool Development Grant Birth-5 (PDG B-5). Through PDG B-5, our four state agencies have partnered on numerous projects to strengthen, streamline, align and innovate our approach to the existing universe of early childhood programs since 2019. We produced a new, comprehensive 2024 Needs Assessment and are working on updates to our five year *All In For Kansas Kids* strategic plan for early childhood.

Additionally, the Children’s Cabinet serves as the state lead for the federal Community Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) program. The focus of CBCAP is primary prevention efforts. We use these grant funds to provide programs designed to strengthen families and prevent child abuse and neglect from happening.

All of these responsibilities have prepared the Children’s Cabinet to take on a new leadership role in the state’s early childhood system. 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 any existing or new grant programs that may be developed and administered by the unified entity;
- 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 last year 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 testify in **support of HB 2785**. I am happy to answer questions at the appropriate time.