



ZERO TO THRIVE

Kansas Child Care & Early Development Coalition

THRIVE  **ALLEN COUNTY**

March 7, 2023

Opponent Testimony

Verbal In-Person Testimony

Senator Renee Erickson, Chair

Senate Committee on Commerce

Dear Chair Erickson and Members of the Senate Commerce Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in opposition to SB 282. I am speaking on behalf of Thrive Allen County and the Zero to Thrive Kansas Child Care & Early Childhood Development Coalition. Thrive Allen County is a rural non-profit organization located in Iola that focuses on improving health, economic development, recreation and education conditions in our county and the state. The Zero to Thrive coalition advocates for investments in quality child care and policy that empowers families and children to thrive across Kansas– with an intentional focus on our rural communities.

We also want to thank all of you and your fellow legislators who prioritize early childhood education and support taking action to address the major challenges in this critical public infrastructure so our families, businesses, communities, and entire state can thrive. We appreciate the meaningful intentions behind SB 282, as its supporters recognize the importance and urgency the child care crisis in Kansas demands of our lawmakers. The majority of child care programs across the state of Kansas have extensive waiting lists, so it initially does seem intuitive to increase child care licensing ratios and lower training expectations for child care providers to more immediately meet the needs of children and families. However, Kansas families and communities expect our leaders not only to address the quantity of child care slots – but to also make decisions that maintain and improve the quality of child care for our most vulnerable and precious Kansans.

Children, especially the younger they are, experience major developmental and health benefits from receiving quality and direct supervision, education, protection, and care throughout their childhood. Further emphasizing the importance of accessing quality early childhood education, 90% of human brain development happens from ages zero to five. Legislators have the opportunity to create a legacy that spans generations by listening to and investing in the child care workforce who are, in turn, investing their energy and expertise in our tiniest Kansans in their greatest time of need. SB 282 is well-intentioned, but it does not have broad support amongst child care providers and program leaders because of its potential impact on the workload of current providers and lower training expectations that could result in lower quality child care. Child care regulations and licensing should be developed with

input and support from child care providers and early childhood education system leaders. Kansas child care providers care deeply about the quality of service and education children receive, even to the point when they could potentially make more money by filling slots many often decide not to ensure workers aren't overburdened and children are properly cared for. The self-reported desired capacity for child care programs is only 67,670 slots, yet Kansas has a total of 78,820 licensed child care slots (Kansas Child Care Aware Point in Time Data, 2023). The 11,150 licensed child care slots that child care providers choose not to fill illustrates the reality of the staffing challenges programs face, and that SB 282 alone does not mean child care capacity will increase without additional action and investment.

If providers and programs decide to take advantage of SB 282's increase in ratios and decreased training expectations, those decisions would be driven by their programs' distressing financial situations. Early childhood educators' primary focus should be how to provide the best quality of service and education to Kansas children— we urge you and your fellow legislators to listen to them, lend a hand, and help make that goal a reality.

Kansas legislators aiming to champion early childhood education can improve the availability of new child care in their communities while supporting quality child care by addressing the root of the child care problem— a burned out, undervalued child care workforce. With this in mind, the most impactful step you could take is by investing in child care provider compensation and benefits as a means to improve our state's recruitment and retention of this vital workforce, resulting in the creation of more quality child care slots for our families and businesses to depend upon for longer.

Kansas early childhood program administrators and leaders are acutely aware of the difficulty and burnout in their workforce, but our communities do not necessarily always see that side of the problem. From their perspective, there is just a lack of available and affordable child care. Many Kansans do not know the average hourly wage for a child care provider in Kansas is \$10.90 an hour with no benefits, and that this has led to the child care workforce shortage at the root of our child care supply problem. There are additional regulatory actions lawmakers can take to support the growth and quality of child care in Kansas being discussed within KDHE alongside providers from across the state, we should all follow the lead of the early childhood educators who are doing the work every day in our communities. It is for these reasons we stand in opposition to SB 282 and look forward to working with all of you to figure out what steps to take next to proactively address the child care crisis in Kansas.

Thank you for your leadership, time, and consideration— please reach out with any questions.

Sincerely,

Logan Stenseng

Policy Coordinator