

March 20, 2013

Chairman Siegfried and Honorable Members of the House Federal and State Affairs Committee,

My name is Deanna Berry and I am the Executive Director of the Russell Child Development Center, a job that has given me insights into the policies and supports needed by children from Kansas' diverse communities, in order to ensure the full development of their potential and the best interests of our state. In Southwest Kansas we live and work with individuals from many different backgrounds and cultures, making our experience rich and unique. In the world of early childhood we serve many families with young children who have chosen to live here because their families are here and they have the opportunity for work and to build a better life. These parents wish to provide a stable home and basic education for their children--and they are eager to learn how to help their children learn. We employ staff members who understand various cultures (including the variance among individual families of European descent who have grown up together for decades in western Kansas communities).

In order to effectively provide early intervention services we must understand and implement research-based practices. We must also comply with requirements to employ professionals who are licensed in their fields. Unfortunately, Western Kansas is not always seen for the wonderful place it can be to live, and we struggle to recruit and retain qualified professionals (Master's level Early Childhood Special Education Teachers, Speech Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists, Social Workers, Bilingual Interpreters, etc.). Young students who have grown up in Western Kansas who have the opportunity to afford to attend college and gain the skills needed to work in these higher-paying jobs in rural areas must be supported and encouraged. Bright, capable students who are newcomers to this country whose families are located in Western Kansas are prime candidates to support and recruit to come back "home" to work in these hard-to-fill positions. Instead of continuing to ignore these barriers, isn't it in our best interest to make a path to higher learning more accessible to those who have chosen rural Kansas as their home? Allowing these students to pay the same rate of tuition as other Kansas residents does not cost us anything, but making it harder for them to get an education will cost us all when their potential to be contributing members of our communities is lost.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Deanna Berry

Garden City, KS