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**Testimony for Nebraska Education Committee  
LR 116 - Kindergarten Entrance Age  
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Thank you, Chairman Adams and members of the Education Committee for the opportunity to testify today regarding the kindergarten entrance age, especially as it relates to disadvantaged children and improving their educational outcomes.

I am here representing Building Bright Futures, an Omaha based public-private partnership dedicated to improving academic performance and educational outcomes through the creation of educational excellence and equity. My purpose here today is to bring light to a defining issue that is evident in the LR 116 Discussion Alternatives but that is not clearly stated, and that is the issue of educational equity.

As stated in the Discussion Alternatives, current law allows up to a possible 25 month age range for children entering kindergarten. This is without question a very concerning age gap in a critical period of development in a child's life. Even more concerning are the populations that define the spectrums of this gap. Generally, the majority of children attending publicly funded preschool programs based on financial necessity will begin kindergarten at age 5. Families utilizing grant funded preschool programs such as Head Start typically do not have the financial freedom to delay kindergarten entrance as allowed by current law. Furthermore, families all across the state who qualify for grant funded preschool programs but who cannot access these programs because of limited grant funding and the resulting lack of program availability will also generally enroll their children for kindergarten at age 5. Families with financial means, however, who are given the legal option to delay kindergarten can and do pay for one or even two more years of private preschool. When the rubber meets the road, the starting line for the academic achievement gap is never so clear as when the just turned five year old from a family of low income, who may or may not have had access to a quality preschool experience, meets the seven year old from a family who is financially able to afford the opportunity for their child to benefit from two more years of growth and a leg up in school on the first day of kindergarten.

Altering the compulsory attendance law is the only fair way to close the front door to the escalation of the achievement gap. If the compulsory attendance age were changed to be the age of eligibility to attend kindergarten, the playing field would be as level as it can get because children of differing backgrounds would all be in the same age cohort at the beginning of kindergarten. It would also make a significant difference in results of state testing because it would affect the economic groups similarly age-wise.

The fact is that when a family of financial means chooses to red shirt their child, the child is older when they do attend kindergarten and this trend is making kindergarten more academic. The more it gets done, the greater the developmental disparity in kindergarten, creating an environment



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where the youngest and often times most disadvantaged kindergarteners suffer. The trend in kindergarten curriculum to be geared toward a child at the development age of 7 as opposed to 5 and its resulting effects on parents choosing to red shirt and even retain their children in kindergarten is nothing new.

“Parents often view the traditional activities of kindergarten as trivial and expect the school to “teach” the children content formerly reserved for later in the school program. But at the same time, many parents decide against entering their five-year-olds in kindergarten because they are afraid their children won’t be able to adjust to increased academic demands or to score well on standardized tests.” *Nebraska State Board of Education Position Statement on Kindergarten, Adopted October 1984.*

The two year difference between kindergarteners in today’s schools results is the beginning of the achievement gap evidenced today, a not so narrow achievement gap. Changing the compulsory attendance age, but doing it in combination with moving the kindergarten entrance date is a sort of ‘something for everyone’ approach. Changing the kindergarten entrance date to August 1 would be early enough to get ahead of any school’s fall opening date. In all reality though, it does not make any real difference what the entrance date is; the date is only to establish the point at which a child becomes eligible to participate in free public education. That being said, moving it earlier in the year would only contribute to the escalation of the curriculum, and even more importantly would mean that many low income children would have to wait one more year to get schooling. This is particularly consequential for children learning English.

We know strong foundations in the earliest years lead to positive outcomes and greater economic returns in the later years, but to fully realize these outcomes and returns we need a policy prescription that puts all children entering public education at the same starting line.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration of the issue.



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