

Bill Testimony for HB 17-1042 – Funding Full Day Kindergarten

Good afternoon Madame Chair and members of the committee. My name is Bill Jaeger, and I am the Vice President of Early Childhood Initiatives at the Colorado Children’s Campaign and appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of HB 17-1042.

Access to a full-day of kindergarten is an effective approach to supporting the school readiness of young children. Nearly all Colorado children attend kindergarten and 77.3% of all enrolled kindergarteners are in a full day this year. This is up from just 40% just nine years ago and just 70% even three years ago. In short, demand has increased dramatically for full-day kindergarten over the past several years and has jumped again in the last year. Currently 128 of Colorado’s 178 school districts have 100% of their kindergarteners enrolled in a full-day. That number is 148 of 178 for districts that have 90% or more of their kindergarteners in a full day. They are doing this, even those these children are only funded at a little more than half their first grade classmates down the hall.

Still, there are nearly 15,000 kindergarteners not enrolled in a full day and another significant portion of full-day kindergarteners who only have access because their parents can afford the tuition or because their local communities can afford a mill levy to cover the costs or because the district is cutting from somewhere else to offer access – this means these opportunities not available to all of Colorado’s children or come at the sacrifice of other opportunities for children. Schools and districts are responding to parent demand, but are doing so without adequate support from the state.

This is puzzling given the strong and growing evidence-base for how valuable a full-day experience is for children. Recent evidence from a gold standard research study (random selection, random assignment to full versus half day kindergarten) shows strong results in terms of early literacy. All students benefit from these early experiences, but, in particular, Hispanic students benefit in some of the strongest ways. This is also true of students who enter kindergarten with low literacy skills -- they experience particularly large gains. As a result, there is a substantial return on this investment.

There is consistent evidence that gaps by race and socioeconomic status are already sizable at the start of the kindergarten year. In addition, these gaps often persist and grow throughout the primary grades. Investing in prevention, rather than remediation is one of the most cost effective approaches to addressing our K-12 education challenges. We fully realize the proposed upfront cost of this investment requires a long-range on the return for those dollars. This is a first step toward a multi-step, strategic vision for increasing support for access to full-day kindergarten.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.