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January 28, 2014

To: Members of the Education Committee

From: Aubrey Mancuso, Policy Coordinator

Re: LB 952

We first want to thank Senator Lautenbaugh for drawing attention to the issue of grade-level reading. We know that grade-level reading is critical to student success and students who are unsuccessful in making the transition from learning to read to reading to learn are likely to continue to experience challenges throughout their school years and beyond.

In 2012, only 36% of Nebraska 4<sup>th</sup> graders and 35% of Nebraska 8<sup>th</sup> graders were proficient or better in reading. In addition, family income is a strong predictor of reading proficiency and 79% of Nebraska students in both grades 4 and 8 who scored basic or below on reading tests were low-income.<sup>1</sup>

I am here testifying in a neutral capacity today because we support Senator Lautenbaugh's overall goal of addressing grade-level reading as well as some portions of the bill, but we also want to raise a few concerns.

First, we appreciate the use of scientifically-based research methods, the ongoing monitoring of reading progress and the inclusion of parents as part of a reading intervention program. These are all important components of improving grade level reading. In addition, the bill does provide some expanded opportunity for summer learning, which has been shown to have a positive impact on test scores.<sup>2</sup>

However one element of the bill that raises significant concern: **the retention of students in the third grade based on test scores.** An abundance of research on this issue shows that holding children back in third grade is not an effective intervention and can have damaging consequences. Retention policies are associated with increased social, emotional and behavioral problems and an increased likelihood that a student will fail to graduate from high school.<sup>3</sup> Retention policies have also been associated with an increase in disruptive classroom dynamics, impacting non-retained peers.<sup>4</sup> In short, many of the

<sup>1</sup> Voices for Children in Nebraska, Kids Count in Nebraska Report (2013)

<sup>2</sup> Terzian et al, Effective and Promising Summer Learning Programs and Approaches for Economically Disadvantaged Children and Youth: A White Paper for the Wallace Foundation (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Jimerson and Renshaw, Retention and Social Promotion (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Gottfried, M.A. "Retained students and classmates' absences in urban schools." *American Educational Research Journal* 50, no. 6 (2013):

studied outcomes of retention policies run contrary to the stated goals. Finally, retention is a costly strategy for schools, at a nationwide average of around \$10K per student retained.<sup>5</sup> These resources could be more effectively directed at earlier interventions.

In addition, we hope that the committee will consider the following when assessing interventions for to grade level reading:

- 1) **Interventions that start at the Kindergarten level are starting too late.** Effective interventions for reading proficiency should start with access to quality early childhood programs where they are the most cost-effective and will have the most impact.
- 2) **Many of the challenges related to grade-level reading are related to poverty.** We should maximize the use of available community, state, and federal resources for schools that help children come to school ready to learn. Effective interventions that impact student achievement include increased access to federal school nutrition programs, summer reading programs available through public libraries, and school-based health centers that help ensure that access to medical care isn't a barrier to attendance.

We encourage the committee to explore these alternative strategies and continue the conversation on improving grade-level reading.

Thank you.

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<sup>5</sup> West, M.R. "Is retaining students in the early grades self-defeating?" *Brookings*. August 16, 2012.