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March 21, 2023

To: Chairperson Murman and Members of the Education Committee
From: Anahí Salazar, Policy Coordinator for Voices for Children in Nebraska
RE: Support for LB 527, to provide reimbursement to school districts and educational service units for mental health expenditures.

Our state's prosperity is determined by our ability to support the well-being of the next generation of Nebraskans. When children experience challenges and when we invest wisely, we can best ensure that all children will be able to reach their potential into adulthood. Voices for Children supports LB 527 because it would meaningfully address a rising need for mental and behavioral health among Nebraska's children.

Positive experiences early in childhood creates the foundation for successful outcomes in adulthood. By contrast, stressful and prolonged experiences in childhood creates a weak foundation and can lead to serious mental health problems.¹ Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can wreak havoc on proper development. It is estimated that 35% of all Nebraska children have been exposed to at least two ACEs.² Left unaddressed, ACEs have been shown to result in increased risk for poor health outcomes and risky behaviors in adulthood.³

Adequate treatment of mental health needs ensures that children can develop and function properly. However, barriers to access are significant for children and families. As communities and families emerge from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are likely to see many more young people struggling with mental health and challenges in reconnecting with learning. The change in percentage of children (ages 3 to 17) who had anxiety or depression from 2016 to 2020 was 28.4%.⁴ Now is the time for Nebraska to increase our commitment to mental health services that supports the needs of kids.

Schools are uniquely positioned as an ideal environment for the provision of mental health services, where trusted school employees can coordinate with parents to ensure that children's needs are met. LB 527 ensures that schools have the necessary resources to provide much-needed mental health services to Nebraska students. We thank Senator Fredrickson for his leadership on this issue and this Committee for their work. We respectfully urge the Committee to advance LB 527. Thank you.

¹"Adverse Childhood Experiences and the Lifelong Consequences of Trauma," American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014, https://www.aap.org/en-us/documents/ttb_aces_consequences.pdf

² 2020-2021 National Survey of Children's Health, Family Health and Activities, Indicator 6.13.

³ 2022 Kids Count Report. Voices for Children in Nebraska. Adverse Childhood Experiences.

⁴ The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022 Kids Count Data Book, State Trends in Child Well-being, A pandemic atop a pandemic: kids' and families' mental health in 2020, page 7.