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Testimony to House Education Committee
House Human Services, Proposed Changes to Pre-K
Elaine Collins, Superintendent
North Country Supervisory Union

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. For the record, I'm Elaine Collins, the superintendent of North Country Supervisory Union. It is always my hope that I can provide testimony to you in person, so I apologize that I need to be remote today.

Because context matters, as a reminder, North Country Supervisory Union has 11 schools plus the North Country Career Center. We include the towns of Brighton, Charleston, Coventry, Derby, Holland, Jay, Lowell, Morgan, Newport Center, Newport City, Troy, and Westfield. The farthest span we have is from Jay-Westfield Elementary School to Brighton Elementary School, about 65 miles, or an hour and six minutes from one point to another.

There is no doubt in anyone's mind today that preschool in our schools is value added to our systems. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Since COVID, the needs of our schools have shifted. It used to be that the neediest population was older middle school or early high school students. Now, both in scope and intensity, that has shifted to our youngest children. Some of our young children, with lower speech and language abilities, struggle with emotional regulation and social interactions. Since behavior is a form of communication, we are seeing increased behavioral challenges from students who lack the words to tell us what they need from us. Instead they show us: with tantrums and increased aggression. Additionally many of our K – 2 classrooms across our supervisory union have students who are experiencing challenges with potty training. We want our K – 2 teachers to concentrate on early literacy and math skills and concepts, rather than helping to potty train a student, so we have had to increase support staff positions to help manage this.

Without preschools in our schools, I can't imagine how badly this problem would be magnified. In our area, as with many other areas across our state, there is a lack of high-quality daycare facilities. With the good intention to improve the care that our youngest children receive, the additional rules that have been imposed by the state has regulated many of the home providers out of business, limiting the number of choices that parents have for daycare or early care. Therefore, many of our families rely on our schools as the only option they have for early care. It is critical that we can continue to provide this early intervention for all students, but especially for our neediest and most vulnerable children.

However, this service doesn't come without a cost. For NCSU for FY26, the cost of having preschool in our buildings is \$2,376,319. For our operating districts, this ranges from \$72,000 at one of our smaller, part-time sites in Lowell to over \$550,000 in our largest elementary school in Derby. We recoup some of these costs through a small IDEA grant for special education, which pays for our Early Childhood Coordinator position and a couple of

other small things and through the addition of revenues from the LTW ADM added from preschool students.

Likely if we didn't invest in our youngest students, we would see an even greater percentage of students who would need to access alternate day treatment programs in grades K – 2. Although we are exploring ways to collaborate on creating programming for alternates with our neighbors, right now those day treatment facilities cost \$65,000 to \$130,000 just for tuition for one child, not counting transportation and summer programming. Preschool is simply a good investment to make.

There are challenges in the way that preschool is implemented though.

1. The current rules require that superintendents sign off on licensing for preschool educators in private programs – a program that we do not oversee or supervise directly. There are challenges with quality of programming and a liability if the person who is provisionally licensed – under the superintendent's license – does something egregious. Since we have no control over the private program and no direct oversight, this creates a tenuous situation for superintendents. The proposed changes would cement that requirement moving forward.
2. When our identified preschoolers require special education, OT, PT, or ELL we are on the hook for providing these services, whether the student is at home, in a private program, or in our schools. This requires early childhood special education teachers and other service providers to travel to where the child is to provide the service. One of the proposed changes is to require that supervisory unions or districts allow students to expand the region to virtually anywhere that works for the student. With so many geographical challenges already, it would be difficult to provide services for students in a larger region. Getting service providers to those locations would likely be more expensive for transportation costs and make the system less efficient – with longer distances, the fewer students that can be serviced, the more people we have to employ to cover all the services.
3. The regulatory oversight of preschools that are housed in an elementary school should be done by the Agency of Education. Currently, we have separate rules and regulations that are connected to preschool only. It would be less onerous and less cumbersome to manage one regulatory agency in our schools and would also make more sense for our staff and students.

I also have a few concerns about the proposed changes:

1. Requiring supervisory unions or districts to be responsible for expansion of preschool opportunities in our regions. Making the school system to participate in focus groups and to connect families with a preschool program that would work for

their family adds a bureaucratic burden to an already complex system. NCSU already has an Early Childhood Coordinator. If this were to become a requirement, we would need to employ more coordinators to manage the expansion of preschool. If we chose to expand our own programs to fulfill the requirements, we would add to the \$2.3 million price tag for preschool.

2. Moving away from weights to a block grant would increase our overall spending per LTW ADM, which would require us to make cuts in other programming to offset. For example, in modeling this for FY27 in NCSU, if we no longer counted preschoolers in our ADM, it would cause our spending per LTW ADM by almost \$300 to almost \$1200 per student (see the chart which was sent to you separately), with bigger effects in some of our smaller schools. This would have a disproportionately negative effect on our smaller schools. Since the ballot language shows voters the per pupil cost, it causes additional downward pressure on passing budgets with our voters.

In closing, from an outsider's perspective looking into the legislature, there appears to be many different committees and interests in the legislature, who are all working in a somewhat siloed way. In the House and Senate Education Committees, you are working hard to try to contain costs with education spending. In some of the other committees, like with this particular bill, there are committees that are trying to do good work, but in the long-run would actually add cost to the overall spending in education. In this case and in lots of other cases, I would ask you to consider whether the benefits of the proposal outweigh the potential negative consequences, and that you consider whether the proposal will add to the cost in schools in either the financial picture or with the humans who are trying to implement the system. And then ask yourselves: does this make sense? If the answer is no, then perhaps now isn't the time for the proposed changes.