



Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

April 24, 2019

Representative Jeffrey Elmore, Chair
Representative John A. Fraley, Chair
Representative D. Craig Horn, Chair
Representative Pat B. Hurley, Chair
Representative John Sauls, Chair
House Standing Committee on Appropriations, Education
North Carolina General Assembly
Legislative Building
16 West Jones Street
Raleigh, NC 27601

RE: OPPOSITION to HB 485, AN ACT TO ESTABLISH A VIRTUAL EARLY LEARNING PILOT PROGRAM FOR PRESCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

Dear Honorable Representatives:

Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC) and Defending the Early Years (DEY), both national organizations which advocate on behalf of the well-being of children, write to respectfully ask you to stand up for the well-being of children and vote “No” on HB 485, which would establish a three-year “virtual early-learning” pilot program targeted to “at-risk” preschool age children.

In October 2018, CCFC and DEY issued a [Position Statement on Online Preschool](#), which has been endorsed by more than 100 experts in child development and early education. These experts and advocates say that so-called “online preschool” programs are poor substitutes for high-quality early education, and that funding online programs instead of high-quality early education will make inequality worse, not better. They said what these tech companies offer is not preschool, but a marketing scheme designed to sell a virtual facsimile of real preschool, and “[a]ll of our knowledge about human development demonstrates that children learn best through exploratory, creative play and relationships with caring adults.”

As discussed in detail in the Position Statement, “online pre-K” may expose kids and families to new types of risks. Research shows that screen overuse puts young children at risk of behavior problems, sleep deprivation, delays in social emotional development, and obesity, and extended time on screens diminishes time spent on essential early learning experiences such as lap-reading, creative play, and other social forms of learning. Relational learning requires healthy interactions with adults, and online experiences falsely marketed as “preschool” or “school readiness” sabotage the development of these essential relationships. Children without access to quality pre-K, like the “at-risk” children who would be part of this pilot program, already face a higher risk of academic difficulty than their peers, and this

program would likely expand, not close, that gap. In addition, by propagating the myth that kindergarten readiness can be transmitted through online lessons, a highly publicized pilot program will mislead families about the relative value of digital education vs. (or compared to) hands-on learning for young children.

We also note that under HB 485, the North Carolina pilot program would be called “UpStart.” It is common knowledge that Waterford Institute, located in Utah, has an “online preK” program called UPSTART that it is aggressively marketing to several states. Waterford has also publicly admitted that its ultimate goal is to get states to foot the bill for their online preschool product, or, as they have rebranded it, “kindergarten readiness.” North Carolina taxpayers will surely question whether HB 485’s “Contractor Requirements,” which describe how the State Board of Education shall issue a request for proposal for a pilot program to be called “UpStart,” are a smokescreen for plans to grant this contract to Waterford UPSTART.

Virtual preschool may save taxpayers money, but it’s at the expense of children and families. Early learning is not a product. It is a process of social and relational interactions that are fundamental to children’s later development. Asserting that this process can take place online, without human contact, falsely implies that the needs of children and families can be met with inexpensive, screen-based alternatives.

For these reasons, we respectfully urge you to protect the well-being of North Carolina children, and vote “No” on HB 485.

Sincerely,

Josh Golin
Executive Director
Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

Blakely Bundy
Co-Director
Defending the Early Years

Geralyn Bywater McLaughlin
Co-Director
Defending the Early Years

cc: Honorable Members of the House Standing Committee on Appropriations, Education

