

Parents, others plug child care bill
Janell Cole - 01/29/2009

BISMARCK – North Dakota needs to boost training and pay for child care workers as part of its economic development strategy, parents, business people and children’s advocates told lawmakers Wednesday. “The current child care system is broken and unable to keep up with North Dakota’s economy,” Linda Lembke, president of the North Dakota Association for the Education of Young Children, told the House Education Committee. She outlined one young couple’s struggle to find quality child care, a business plagued by employee turnover in which the average North Dakota worker earns \$16,000 per year. “While turnover is common in low-wage fields, it cannot be accepted in child care,” she said. Lembke and others were testifying about House Bill 1418, which calls for about \$15 million in spending in 2009-11. The money would boost pay for child care workers, provide a voluntary rating system parents could refer to in picking a program, and provide grants as incentives to good providers. “This proposal is a bargain,” Lembke said. Supporters included Bismarck business owner Bill Shalhoob, speaking for the North Dakota Chamber of Commerce, who said the state’s economic growth calls for better child care. Shannon Lang, director of the child care program at the YMCA in Fargo, said that even though workers there are paid \$9.70 per hour and have dental, health and vision insurance and retirement, she’s still seen 60 percent turnover in the past two years. Three of four lead teachers quit to work as paraprofessionals in the school district, making more part time than they could working full time for the YMCA center. The committee took no immediate action.

Cole works for Forum Communications Co., which owns The Forum. She can be reached at (701) 224-0830