



83 West Street, Danbury, CT 06810

Phone: (203) 797-8088 Fax: 792-7626

Visit us on the internet at <http://www.danburychildrenfirst.org>

February 28, 2007

Re: S.B. No 1114 An Act Implementing the Governor's Budget Recommendations Regarding Education and H.B. No. 7241 An Act Concerning After School Program Grants and Parent Involvement

Dear Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and Education Committee members,

On behalf of Danbury Children First and the Danbury School Readiness Council, we urge your support of increased allocations for more School Readiness programs slots for three and four-year old children. We support increased funding that reaches at least to ERG H and ERG I. We also urge your consideration of flexibility in working with local communities and their School Readiness Councils as they build their capacity for more School Readiness slots. Facilities and staff have to be developed in order to increase capacity significantly.

School Readiness Programs are an important part of Connecticut's efforts to close the achievement gap and prepare preschoolers for kindergarten. By increasing funding, adding flexibility, and ensuring that administrative funds keep up with demands, the program will be able to meet its goals.

We urge you to support increased School Readiness funding and the Governor's Early Childhood Research & Policy Council's Recommendations to provide increased fiscal support for high-quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-old children in families at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty level, with the following changes:

1. The 2.5 hour/part-day option should not be eliminated because many parents find this the best option for their children and their families' schedules. Policies should allow for either a 2.5- or a 4-hour day option.
2. Funding for administration should be increased proportionately as the number of School Readiness slots increases.
3. Quality Enhancement Funds should be tied to SDE slot allocation.

The Danbury School Readiness Council now funds 289 slots in 12 centers. The Council would like to be able to fund more slots next year. Danbury received \$1,767,387 in School Readiness funds in 2005-2006.

Statewide and locally, the program has proven to be effective. A 2004 evaluation conducted by the Connecticut Commission on Children showed that the children who attended school readiness programs had improved language, literacy, math, and fine motor skills, as well as improved social and emotional skills. In Danbury, reading scores were higher and absenteeism rates were lower among children who attended School Readiness Programs. First grade students who had attended School Readiness Programs scored 6% higher on the Degrees of Reading Assessment (DRA) than all first-grade students. While 20% of all second-grade students were absent 10 or more days, only 12% of students who attended School Readiness programs were absent 10 or more days.

The purpose of Danbury Children First, Inc. is *to involve, empower, and support parents* to improve the lives of children at home, in school and in the community.

In Danbury, our past experience created the following issues for us in implementing of the School Readiness Grant:

- Rigid requirements regarding part-time slots make it difficult for some families to participate in the program. More flexibility should be added at the local level so that the family schedules can be accommodated.
- Funding for local administration of the program should not remain stagnant as funding for additional slots increases. Administration costs should increase proportionately to total funding. Funding for administrative costs has remained level since the inception of the program in 1997. The number of children served in Danbury has doubled, yet the cost to oversee the program has not increased.
- Quality Enhancement (QE) funds are currently under the DSS budget and are not in a designated line item. They are a discretionary line item in the DSS budget. They have decreased almost 50% over the past ten years. The amount a community receives in QE funds should be directly related to the grant allocation. We recommend 5% of the grant allocation be matched with QE funds.
- Funding has increased, but that hasn't always meant that more children are being served. A mandated increase of \$250 per slot in FY 2006 meant that fewer children could be served with the same level of funding. While we are in favor of per slot increases, particularly as it translates into raising teacher salaries as quality also increases, we also need additional quality center-based slots for our three and four-year old children.

We also support H.B. 7241 An Act Concerning After School Program Grants and Parent Involvement. As a parent-led organization, we know first hand the value of parental engagement. For example, our local parent leaders have been active in helping to gain more access to out-of-school time programs for children with special needs, and have been involved on a panel for professional development to help providers learn more about involving parents. In addition, through focus groups, our Latino parents have expressed their desire to help with after school programs. Parents have been delivering the message that they are here to help. There is a great potential to expand opportunities to our children with parents as partners in the delivery of out-of-school programs, and we hope that the funding permits flexibility to achieve such a partnership.

Danbury Children First is a parent-led organization with over 80 volunteers, members and partners that reaches 9,000 families annually. Danbury Children First works in partnership with the Danbury School Readiness Council that serves over 250 children, and is a member and supporter of the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance policy agenda that includes increasing resources to young children and their families to ensure that every child can reach their potential.

If you would like additional information, please contact me at (203) 797-8088 or at Lindak@danburychildrenfirst.org. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Sincerely,



Linda A. Kosko, M.S.

Collaborative Director, Danbury Children First, Inc.

Chair, Public Awareness Committee, Danbury School Readiness Council