



Testimony by Rhona Free, Vice President of Academic Affairs on behalf of Elsa M. Núñez, President of Eastern Connecticut State University Before the Education Committee, March 8, 2010

Good morning, Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee. For the record, I am Rhona Free, Vice President of Academic Affairs at Eastern Connecticut State University (ECSU) speaking on behalf of Elsa Núñez, President of Eastern. Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today. We are grateful for your advocacy for education and the difference it can make, not only for our students but for our state.

I would like to offer some comments on Senate Bill 380, "*An Act Concerning Early Childhood Education Credentialing.*" The bill directs the Commissioner of Education to use unexpended funds for providing professional development to school readiness staff to meet the qualifications and competencies of early childhood teachers in state funded preschool programs—these require by 2015 that in each classroom there will be an individual with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or certification.

Current law (Public Act 05-245) requires School Readiness teachers to have a minimum of a bachelor's degree by 2015. However, there is growing evidence that suggests that this standard is unachievable. At this time, less than a third of these teachers hold a bachelor's degree. Furthermore, the State Department of Higher Education conducted an analysis and concluded that because of the time required for students to complete their bachelor's degrees, achieving the 2015 goal would require extraordinary measures. Moreover, the 50/50 requirement is the standard that has been set by the federal government for Head Start (by 2013) and by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (by 2015).

I would urge the Committee to consider combining the bill before you with Senate Bill 275, "*An Act Concerning Staff Qualifications for School Readiness Programs for 2015*" which requires that by 2015 these teachers must hold an associate's or a bachelor's degree from an approved competency-based higher education program. A minimum of 50 percent of teachers in each program must have a bachelor's degree and the remaining 50 percent of teachers must have an associate's degree (50/50 requirement). Individuals graduating from these approved programs would also earn an Early Childhood Teacher Credential (ECTC) as documentation of meeting this competency-based standard.

Eastern Connecticut State University is uniquely positioned to help teachers and the State reach this 50/50 requirement. ECSU offers, as part of its current teacher preparation program, several courses that could be slightly modified to serve as the foundation of an appropriate competency-based baccalaureate program for School Readiness teachers. We would be willing, in collaboration with other higher education institutions in Connecticut, to develop a program that would articulate with associate degree programs currently offered in the community colleges.

We would also be happy to work with non-traditional education providers – in particular Charter Oak State College – to design a program that can be taken to the workplace using a combination of technology assisted courses and on-ground courses, as well as hands-on components in an effort to create the capacity to meet the demand on higher education programs that this standard would imply.

Eastern Connecticut State University, in collaboration with Central, Southern and Western Connecticut State Universities, has the capacity to offer an innovative credit-earning program that uses technology to promote the professional development of preschool teachers and child care providers within their worksites. We envision a theoretically coherent, carefully-sequenced program that integrates DVD course packages, distance learning modules, and some traditional on-ground courses that can be completed by teachers throughout the state. Such a program could begin modestly, by piloting one or two courses, but could then be scaled up to become a full degree program with funding from federal grants and state support.

ECSU also houses the Center for Early Childhood Education that opened in 2007 as a multidisciplinary research and training institute. The Center brings together researchers, educators, trainers, students, practitioners, and policymakers from a variety of disciplines to share ideas, resources, research findings, and techniques for working with young children and their families.

The Center's mission is to promote best practices in early childhood education through the following types of activities:

- **Research and research dissemination:** Faculty affiliated with the Center engage in a variety of research projects related to young children, focusing on areas such as social development, motor development, use of technology, and teachers' interactions with children. Research projects are often conducted in collaboration with teachers in the comprehensive children's program.
- **Professional development:** The Center provides a variety of research-based professional opportunities, including conferences, workshops and seminars, interactive training CDs, in-classroom coaching, on-line courses, and for-credit courses.
- **Consultation:** Center faculty and staff provide consultation, technical assistance, and evaluation services to schools, early care and education centers, and state and local agencies.
- **Video resources:** The Center maintains a growing library of early childhood video clips for observation, research, and use in adult education and professional development. Center facilities and video archives may be made available to visiting scholars. The Center draws from the video archive to produce periodic podcasts that early childhood professionals can download and view at any time.
- **Partnership with children's program:** Center faculty work closely with teachers in Eastern's comprehensive children's program to design curriculum, conduct research, and test new ideas in early childhood education.

This tremendous resource would facilitate any proposal for a technology-based preschool teacher education Program.

Several alternative approaches for initiating such a program are presented below, along with estimates of their associated instructional costs. Total costs for each approach are based on the assumption that 15 students from each of four geographic areas in the state (60 students in all) will participate in the program at any one time. For some of these approaches, substantial one-time production/development costs are required.

Eastern could immediately offer a course in Preschool Child Guidance, utilizing an interactive DVD developed through a project funded by the U.S. Department of Defense several years ago. Clusters of students could be identified in communities close to the four Universities (Hartford area, New Haven area, Danbury/Waterbury, and Windham/New London/Groton). Preschool teachers could complete the course within their own worksites and may receive guidance from the local directors in their schools or centers. Students could upload documentation of classroom and teaching improvement projects—required in the course—to the instructor for evaluation. Communications across sites and students could be facilitated by on-line threaded discussions and teleconferencing.

The possibilities are exciting, and the need for enhanced teacher training for this workforce is evident. We, at Eastern stand ready to partner to develop and deliver high quality baccalaureate level course work to this very significant workforce.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.