



Testimony submitted February 23, 2011

To the Education Committee

AN ACT CONCERNING THE SCHOOL ENTRANCE AGE

SB-930

**Dr. Paul Copes
Executive Director of Education
Community Renewal Team, Inc., Hartford, CT**

Good afternoon Chairman Fleischmann, Chairman Stillman and members of the Education Committee. My name is Paul Copes, and I am the Executive Director of Education at Community Renewal Team, Inc., a community action agency in central Connecticut and the largest provider of human services in the state. I am here today to join many other educators and child development experts to raise concerns about Senate Bill 930, which would delay the entry of five-year-old children into kindergarten, while failing to add preschool classrooms for those who would be forced to wait an entire year to enroll in school. For the past 10 years I have led the Early Care and Education program at CRT, which offers early care and education to more than 1,400 children in six municipalities in Central Connecticut. Before coming to CRT, I spent my entire career in the public education system, so I have had the pleasure of watching our state's children from their first infant days in a child care center to their graduation from high school.

There are several reasons why CRT cannot support a proposal that postpones enrollment for kindergarten by a quarter of a year.

First, the proposal runs counter to a great deal of early childhood development research, which emphasizes the importance of children entering formal learning activities as early as possible. As you know, the brain develops to 90% of its capacity in the first five years of a child's life.

Therefore, it is crucially important that public policy accelerates children's enrollment in a rich, stimulating and developmentally appropriate educational program.

Where are children having those first important educational experiences? Unfortunately for a great many of them, the first classroom environment is their public school kindergarten. The most recent report by Voices for Children looks across our state, and points out that enrollment in preschool varies widely by DRG. In cohort I, more than 32% of children came to kindergarten without any preschool experience whatsoever; in some school districts this can be as high as 38%! Some of these children spend their earliest years with their parents or grandparents; others are in some type of unregulated home care. In either case, they are not being exposed to the readiness skills required for success in their early years of schooling. Delaying kindergarten entry for five-year-olds will merely compound this problem and result in more children remaining at home in non-educational environments. This can only increase the tremendous academic gap between poor children and their more prosperous peers in Connecticut.

Raising the age for enrolling children in free and universal kindergarten is also a hardship for lower-income working families. There are simply not enough affordable slots in our current system for all of the parents who need high-quality but low-cost care for their children. When former Education Commissioner Mark McQuillan proposed this change, he acknowledged that there would be approximately 4,400 low-income students who would be affected. That's 4,400 parents who may have been looking forward to returning to the workforce – and now find that this option has been postponed for a year. State officials have estimated that it would cost about \$36.7 million to increase early care capacity across the state, to absorb these families. The actual costs during the ramp-up year will be higher still, as providers acquire and renovate appropriate space for these thousands of children.

Yet, if we fail to locate this additional funding, there is an ironic, clearly unintended consequence for three year olds! If total licensed capacity remains fixed, having more five-year-olds remain in their preschool classrooms reduces the number of spaces available for three-year-olds who should be entering preschool. So postponing kindergarten entry creates a wave effect, pushing younger children out of the programs that they and their families need.

All told, this is an issue that has a disproportionate affect upon low income families – those whose children may already be struggling to meet academic milestones. If you are lucky enough to be earning a six figure income, you may complain about paying for an extra year of preschool – but you’re going to be sure that your child is enrolled in a good program, right up until the time that he or she enters kindergarten. However, if you are barely able to pay your rent or put food on the table, it is truly a hardship to postpone kindergarten enrollment for the child who is born in the last quarter of the year.

And what of the expected academic results? Last July, the Regional Educational Laboratory reviewed available evidence and research on how kindergarten entry age affects long term student achievement, and concluded that the results were ... inconclusive. The majority of the evidence seemed to indicate that slightly older children have a modest academic advantage over younger ones in the first few grades of school, but that this advantage typically disappears by mid-elementary school.

As you are well aware, Connecticut has the largest education gap in the nation. Delaying kindergarten entrance for five-year-olds without a simultaneous increase in the number of subsidized preschool spaces will merely compound this problem and result in more children remaining at home

We strongly encourage you to re-think the consequences of this bill. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Community Renewal Team, Inc.

555 Windsor Street, Hartford, CT 06120

Contact information:

Nancy Pappas, Communication Officer
860-560-5689 or pappasn@crtct.org

Speaker information:

Dr. Paul Copes, Executive Director of Education
Community Renewal Team, Inc.
(860) 560-5617 or copesp@crtct.org