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Testimony before the Select Committee on Children

SB 930

Submitted by Sherry Linton, Early Care and Education Policy Analyst

The Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS) would like to thank Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Committee on Education for the opportunity to respond to SB930, "An Act Concerning the School Entrance Age." While CAHS withholds a final position on whether the school entry age should be shifted as outlined in this bill, we implore you to fully review the possible consequences of such a change, including the possibility of adverse unintended consequences to Connecticut's children and families.

According to released data, currently a change in the school entry age would affect approximately 10,000 children. It is imperative that a close look is taken at the demographics of those children. Children in more affluent communities are more apt to participate in preschool experiences than those in less affluent communities, due to better access to resources or lack thereof. Consequently, with low-income families currently spending upwards of 30-41% of their income on child care, a change in school entry age would require those families to keep their children in preschool for an extended period, creating an unanticipated expense to families. As a result, low-income families, in particular, may be forced to compromise their child care options; thus, lessening the likelihood that children would remain in learning rich environments. The domino effect would widen the preparation gap of those children with already compromised opportunities, with the cascading negative effect on the already existing achievement gap.

In addition, with the recommended change in school entry age, families that would not be able to afford to maintain the expense of preschool may be forced to significantly compromise care to the extent where children's safety come into question, with the possible result of an increase in child-welfare related cases. A change in the school entry age needs to be accompanied by a clear plan for those children who would otherwise be enrolled in school to ensure they maintain continuity in safe learning rich environments.

The outlined recommendations in the bill also beg the question as to whether the current early care and education infrastructure is equipped to receive the children that would otherwise be enrolling in school. Is consideration being given to the expansion of the School Readiness slots and additional funding to support the cadre of child care options that may be necessary to support Connecticut's families to maintain gainful employment? We ask the Committee to be mindful of the overall impact of the changes recommended to prevent further inequity in the education of Connecticut's children.

Finally, prior to imposing a mandated timeline of 2012 for a change in the school entry age, a thorough study needs to be done on those states that have preceded Connecticut in making such a shift. The study should respond directly to: 1.) How did those states accommodate for the preschool services to the children that would otherwise be enrolling in school; 2.) What was the overall cost to such accommodations; and 3.) What does the data on cohorts of children involved in such a shift reveal about their overall achievement? Preceding a mandate to change the school entry age, outcomes-focused research is necessary to determine if such a shift has in fact produced the intended objectives to determine if the shift will in fact benefit Connecticut's children and families.

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