

**Testimony by  
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I would like to thank the chairs of the Education Committee, Senator Stillman and Representative Fleischmann, and other members of the Committee, for inviting me to speak today. My name is David Nee and I am executive director of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund.

Connecticut needs an early childhood system to address educational disparities and ensure quality services that support early childhood development for every child. According to Columbia University researcher Dr. Sharon Lynn Kagan, the infrastructure necessary to support the varied programs for young children includes: common licensing standards, a quality rating system, early learning standards, measurement and reporting, early childhood teaching credentials, comparable wages, access to pre-k for all 3- and 4-year-olds, and facilities expansion and improvement.

As you may know, the Memorial Fund has worked with Connecticut communities and other partners to improve outcomes for young children since 1994. Our experience, particularly over the last eight years, expands the definition of an early childhood infrastructure to include other capacities, such as: local decision-making structures, parent engagement, results-based community plans, integration of state and local efforts, and measurement of progress.

You may also know that in the past three years, the Memorial Fund has partnered with the State of Connecticut to support local community early childhood planning. Currently, 15 communities are working to implement their plans and another 24 are in the process of developing local plans.

In recent months, we heard from Discovery communities and other partners that Connecticut needs to take this community work to the state level and build a comprehensive, coordinated system that consolidates and makes the best use of all state and local resources.

We are currently working to engage a number of stakeholders to take a closer look at what such a system will need to do. We have more work ahead, but we know that at minimum, an early childhood system must provide key elements. Among them are:

**1. A central point of coordination in state government**, mirrored at the local or regional level, that provides governance and management for early care and education programs, across all existing departments. Currently, the inconsistencies in standards, multiple reporting requirements, differing regulations and program requirements place an extraordinary burden on providers and on parents trying to navigate through a maze of barriers.

**2. A local council with authority for coordination and oversight**, parallel to the state, that could, for example, blend funds, address local needs, maximize local resources, leverage private funds, support providers with technical assistance and ensure the quality of the system. The firm of Holt, Wexler Farnum has done an analytic report on what resources are needed to support the local infrastructure of an early childhood system. This work provides a solid base on which the systems development process can build.

**3. Aligned learning opportunities for all children from birth through third grade.** By this we mean a seamless and effective pathway for children that includes services for infants and toddlers, access for all three- and four-year olds not dependent on a family's ability to pay, and high quality K-3 instruction. This system must not allow any child to be excluded because of parent's inability to pay. Currently estimates range from 9,000 to 14,000 children not being served by the school readiness program. We also need better data about the overall needs of children and the ability to track their progress.

**4. Sustainable financing for early childhood programs**, so that in tough financial times like these vulnerable children do not bear an untenable portion of the burden.

**5. A public/private or nonprofit intermediary organization** that could blend funding from public sources, provide technical assistance to communities and programs, and raise private funds for system development

**6. An early childhood system that focuses on quality.** The research shows that quality is most important during these early years of a child's development. The system will need to pay attention to:

1) Pre-service and in-service training of its workforce. This will be a long-term effort because capacity must be expanded in the community and four-year colleges.

2) Reimbursement rates that drive and reward program quality. In order to hire and retain highly competent individuals, we need to pay attention to compensation and to support the continuous development of our teachers. Several states have "star" quality rating systems for early childhood programs, and, under the auspices of the former Research and Policy Council, an early draft of a QRIS – Quality Rating and Information System – has been sketched out

3) Quality enhancement resources. When given local control, communities can use these dollars to deliver quality improvements as prioritized by each community and to build on local assets.

In closing, we at the Memorial Fund partner with 53 communities, foundations, United Ways, and statewide organizations that have the same goal: **Connecticut children of all races and income levels are ready for school by age five and successful learners by age nine.** To reach that goal, we firmly believe that Connecticut needs the department proposed in this bill. It is time to build a State system that incorporates the strengths of the communities' own experience. We need to align birth to age eight programs and to take a collaborative approach that pulls a wider array of partners, including parents, local leaders, non-profit service providers, civic organizations and other philanthropic organizations to the table.

As you know there is an increasing interest in children's academic achievement throughout the land. Many are especially interested in third grade reading, understanding that the ability to read by that time is a powerful predictor of future success.

What we must understand is that reading successfully by the third grade depends on about a hundred antecedents, from good pre-natal and health care, to parent support, to high quality pre-school. Local early childhood councils, especially those that formally link with the school readiness council, now show great creativity in aligning and linking these initial antecedents. We think it is time the state got behind these efforts and aligned its own efforts more powerfully.

Thank you for your time today.