



Testimony submitted February 17, 2011

## **REQUIREMENTS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS**

### **CGA SB-927**

**Paul Copes**

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Community Renewal Team, Inc., Hartford, CT**

Good morning Chairman Bye, Chairman Willis, and members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee. My name is Paul Copes, and I am here today to speak about revising Senate Bill 927, which would require one teacher in every Early Care and Education classroom to hold a bachelor's degree or equivalent certification in early childhood or special education by 2015. For the past 10 years, I have been Executive Director of Early Care and Education at Community Renewal Team, Inc., which is the designated Community Action Agency for Hartford and Middlesex Counties, the largest non-profit provider of human services in Connecticut, and which runs ECE programs at 19 sites in six cities and towns throughout the state. During that time, I have worked to help the educators in our program attain education and credentials to best serve the more than 1,400 children in our care. While CRT fully supports the professional and educational development of all of our ECE staff, we feel that this benchmark for educational attainment by the year 2015 is unrealistic under current circumstances. We urge:

1. That the requirement for teachers to hold a bachelor's degree be delayed until 2019, a timetable which, given a funding increase for teacher tuition assistance, would allow a substantial portion of ECE staff currently holding associate's degrees or enrolled in education programs to complete bachelor's degrees.
2. That the state increase funding for tuition assistance for early educators' college courses.
3. That this bill include positive incentives for meeting goals rather than punitive sanctions against programs or teachers not in compliance with education attainment standards.

The State's current Charters-A-Course program has helped many ECE professionals in Connecticut attain additional education to become better teachers for our children, and we applaud the program. However, by our estimates, the program is grossly underfunded, and to sufficiently reach all professionals who need to access the program would require an increase of as much as three times the current amount of funding. As the main conduit through which ECE professionals may fund the requirements currently spelled out in Senate Bill 927, it is inaccessible and inadequate. And to ask teachers themselves to foot the bill for additional education is also unfair and unrealistic—with current ECE teacher salaries averaging \$26,000 a year, they simply cannot afford to pay up to \$20,000 for an accredited degree program while balancing family, home and transportation concerns.

CRT has been fortunate to discover efficiencies in its large size and diversified funding streams that have allowed us to offer some tuition reimbursement for our ECE staff to continue their education over the past seven years. Since 2006, CRT has provided \$215,000 in tuition assistance for our ECE staff to pursue college degrees. While our staff has diligently worked under that opportunity to earn degrees, still, less than 20 percent of our teachers currently hold bachelor's degrees. The problem is exacerbated by the turnover that occurs with staff who have completed bachelor's degrees with assistance from CRT and then have moved on to better-paying positions with other schools and providers. Many of our staff have earned associate's degrees, but the time and financial commitments required to attain even that 60-credit credential are extremely burdensome with the current levels of support available from the state.

As a federal Head Start provider, CRT falls under a requirement that 50 percent of Head Start teachers nationwide hold a bachelor's degree by 2013. This also is most likely an unrealistic benchmark, but it is one which holds no sanction for those teachers and programs unable to meet it. Other regulators, such as the National Association for the Education of Young People, require that a designated percentage of staff be *in progress* toward their degrees by certain dates. We would encourage the General Assembly to adopt similar policies for any requirements it seeks to put in place through this bill.

Let me once again reiterate our support for measures to help those responsible for educating our children become the most qualified and able they can be. But let me also reiterate our opinion that the current support structure in place to aid them in that journey is insufficient, and that the state would be better served by adopting more realistic standards for such education advancement.

We strongly encourage you to revise this bill. Thank you for your time and consideration.

**Community Renewal Team, Inc.**

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