

Testimony by Jeffrey Villar, Ph.D. to the Appropriations Committee on

H.B. No. 5030 AN ACT MAKING ADJUSTMENTS TO STATE EXPENDITURES FOR THE
FISCAL YEAR ENDING JUNE 30, 2015

As the Executive Director of the Connecticut Council for Education Reform, I strongly endorse Governor Malloy's universal preschool initiative, the funding for which is in H.B. 5030, "An Act Making Adjustments to State Expenditures for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2015." Over five years, this proposal would phase-in 4,000 high quality preschool slots for low-income children. Universal preschool for low-income children is a critical component of Connecticut's plan to reform education and reduce the achievement gap.

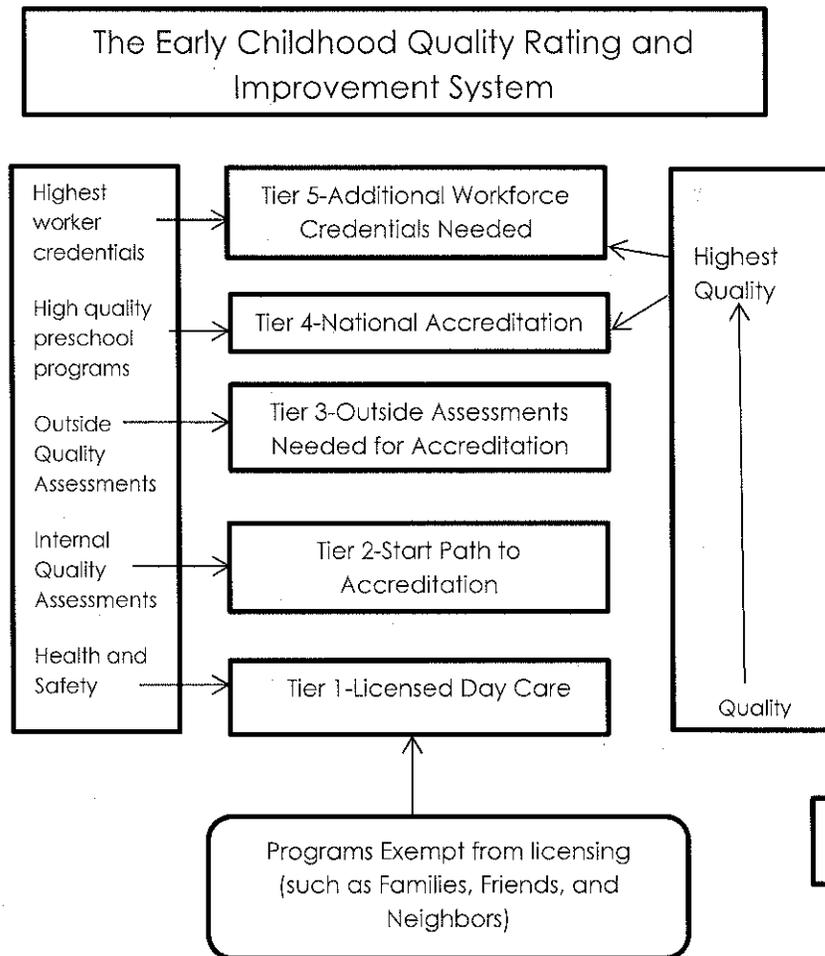
The universal preschool initiative has long-term positive implications for Connecticut's future. Low-income children who attend high quality preschools do better not just in school, but in life. Research shows that low-income preschool graduates are more likely to retain jobs, earn more money, and raise their children in family settings than their peers who did not attend preschool.

Governor Malloy's proposal requires high-quality slots because these programs produce the best child outcomes.

In his budget, Governor Malloy dedicates important new and existing resources to create a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) to systemically improve the quality of Connecticut's patchwork quilt of early learning programs. The QRIS will provide resources and opportunities for early childhood providers to improve the quality of their programs.

According to the Office of Early Childhood's Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant application, the QRIS will include up to five tiers of continuously improving early learning quality,

ranging from licensed day care homes and centers at the first tier to the tier five where national accreditations (plus additional workforce credentials) are required for high quality preschool programs like School Readiness and Head Start. Pictorially, it looks like a ladder:



At each step of this early childhood program ladder, the QRIS will provide resources for providers to improve the quality of their programs. Starting with license-exempt programs, like the Families, Friends, and Neighbors day care programs, QRIS will provide incentives (license reimbursements, a \$500 bonus) for programs to become licensed in the first tier of quality.

In the licensing tier, QRIS funding will be used to increase the frequency of required day care program inspections to ensure these programs are in healthy and safe environments.

To improve beyond licensing, early childhood programs will have access to other incentives. For instance, the QRIS budget will fund regional centers which will provide professional development and technical assistance to early childhood programs in key areas such as child behavioral health and early learning and development standards. Scholarship funding will also be available for early childhood workers who want to earn higher education credentials.

With the forward movement of existing programs through the tiers and onto accreditation, the quality of Connecticut's early childhood system will improve, potentially dramatically. Perhaps, more critically, with these changes, more accredited slots could be created. While FY 2015's investment of 1,020 new slots is a great first start, CCER estimates that 5500 more high quality slots will be needed over the next four years. To meet these goals, more high quality preschool slots must be created. Providing incentives for existing programs to become accredited will be a powerful tool in generating the additional high-quality preschool slots needed to accommodate low-income children.

Additionally, the QRIS will include an information component. Parents will be able to see which preschool programs are of the highest quality. Better informed parents will make better preschool choices for their young children. This is especially important for low-income families whose children can benefit greatly from a quality preschool program.

In conclusion, CCER endorses Governor Malloy's funding of 1,020 new high quality preschool slots for low-income children as a down payment on universal preschool. His recommendation to initiate the QRIS provides a framework to improve the entire early childhood system of programs. The QRIS will increase the number of high quality preschool slots that will be needed to achieve universal preschool for every low-income child in the state.