



Connecticut
Early Childhood
Alliance

Testimony of Merrill Gay
Executive Director, Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance
Before the Appropriations Committee
February 24, 2014

Senator Bye, Representative Walker and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the budget proposal before you. I am Merrill Gay, Executive Director of the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance. The Alliance is a statewide advocacy and membership organization committed to improving outcomes for all children, birth through age eight, in the areas of early learning, health, safety, and economic security.

As you know, the current buzz about the importance of early childhood and the possibilities that early childhood can offer are not news to those in the early childhood field. Mountains of research, over several decades, show the positive benefits that high-quality early childhood programs can realize. Brain researchers have pinpointed early childhood as a key time in the development of future cognitive capacity. Early childhood professionals working with young children here in Connecticut are keenly aware of this research; they also see first-hand how their programs change the lives of the young children they serve. In summary, early childhood is extremely important and early childhood programs here in Connecticut are making a profound difference in the lives of young children.

The budget before you today recognizes this and provides new and increased funding for early childhood. The Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance strongly supports the direction taken in this budget, especially proposals to:

Increase access to preschool – This budget proposes an expansion of preschool spaces by 1,020 this year, and 4,010 by 2019. We urge your support and ask that you ensure funding for these new spaces is flexible to reach children throughout the state.

Currently 90% of School Readiness preschool spaces are in the 19 Priority School districts. Two years ago, when the state last expanded School Readiness, many of the priority school districts struggled to fill their new spaces. Over the past decade, Connecticut has experienced a significant suburbanization of poverty. We must respond to this new reality by updating the School Readiness space allocation process to give more children outside of the Priority School Districts the opportunity to go to preschool.

We know that 20% of children entering kindergarten do not have a preschool experience and are less prepared for school than their peers who attend preschool. Our achievement gap does not begin in the 3rd grade; it just becomes evident at that time. The achievement gap begins with an opportunity gap for early learning experiences.

Planning for universal access to preschool – This budget calls for using approximately \$1 million to support local planning around universal access to pre-k. This is really important because we do not yet have a central data system that tracks information about preschool students. The only way the Office of Early Childhood can have the information needed to develop a plan for universal access is to get it from the communities.

Increase rates for early childhood programs including Care4Kids, School Readiness and Child Day Care Centers – Program rates have been stagnant over the last decade, but costs have gone up. School Readiness rates have not increased since 2006 and Care4Kids rates have not increased in 13 years. This budget calls for a modest 3% rate increase for each of these programs. We strongly urge support for increasing rates.

The Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance is concerned that the increase in rates was not calculated correctly for Child Day Care Centers. In order for the State Funded Centers to get the intended 3% increase and maintain rate parity with School Readiness, roughly \$500,000 must be added to the Child Care Services line item. The 3% increase was calculated on only the state half of the total allocation to the State Funded Centers, the other half coming from a federal block grant that does not appear in the state budget. We ask that you address this to ensure Child Day Care Center rates are increased as intended.

Increase rates for full-day, full-year preschool programs - While we are happy to see an increase in rates after so many years of flat or decreased funding, the Alliance feels strongly that this segment of the state-funded preschool system is still grossly underfunded. Since 2006, full-day, full-year preschool programs have been paid \$8,346 per student. If you do the math, for a 50 week, 10 hour a day program, this level of state funding is a little over \$3 per child per hour. Compare that to the \$10,000 per child that the State Department of Education pays to magnet schools for 6 hour a day, 180 day per year preschool programs. This is over \$9 per hour.

Connecticut invests in preschool programs with the goal of reducing the preparation gap. This gap is evident at the beginning of preschool with low-income children having heard 30 million fewer words and having the vocabulary half the size of their more affluent peers. To close this gap requires skilled teachers and individualized instruction. This is the primary reason why the legislature has called for all teachers in state-funded preschool to have B.A. degrees by 2020. To achieve the results we want, we must be committed to invest in these programs at rates that make it possible to recruit and retain B.A. level staff at the equivalent pay level for a beginning public school teacher. To do that would require current rates to equal \$10,200.

Creation and funding of the Office of Early Childhood – The Office of Early Childhood, created less than a year ago, is a vital coordinating body for early childhood. Prior to its creation, early childhood programs were spread across five agencies. As the core mission of the Office, early childhood is receiving the attention it deserves that was not possible in the large agencies each program was previously housed in. Once all the programs are moved, we expect there will be coordination and synergy between early childhood programs resulting in better outcomes and greater efficiencies. We strongly support funding for the Office and the passage of SB 25 to put the Office of Early Childhood in statute.

Thank you for your time and attention.