



Connecticut
Early Childhood
Alliance

Testimony of Merrill Gay
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Before the Appropriations Committee
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Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and Members of the Committee,

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. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on Raised Bill 340 AN ACT CONCERNING A TWO-GENERATIONAL SCHOOL READINESS PLAN.

This bill instructs the Director of the Office of Early Childhood to develop a plan by December to prioritize children in families with very low incomes below 75% of the federal poverty line (\$11,633 a year for a family of two, \$14,648 for a family of three and \$17,663 for a family of four) for preschool and support their parents in completing their education and enhancing their work skills.

Dual generation learning programs have been effective in both improving school readiness and increasing parents completion of GED programs. There are several good examples here in Connecticut including EvenStart (several locations), Mercy Learning Center in Bridgeport and the Family Literacy Center of Central Connecticut in New Britain. While these programs are all slightly different and have pieced together funding from various sources, there are some common lessons learned from their experience.

Start Earlier - Hart and Risley's research tells us that if we wait until preschool poor child have already heard 30 million fewer words and have a vocabulary only half the size of their more affluent peers. If we want to address the school readiness of these children who face the dual risk factors of very low income and low maternal literacy levels, then we really need to start the intervention earlier. Likewise if we want to improve the odds of the parent(s) completing a GED we should also start while their child is younger. Very low income parents have extremely few childcare options for an infant to enable them re-enter the workforce. Dual generation programs that have figured out how to provide infant and toddler care while the parent(s) take classes have found that they have substantially improved the chances that the parent will stay with the program. Continuing this support with high quality preschool will help, but is not as effective as starting earlier.

Teaching Parenting and Life Skills to Address the Family's Immediate Needs Are as Important to Success as the Formal Education of a GED - Parents who have failed in the regular K-12 system and are struggling with poverty lead complex lives frequently consisting of one crisis after another. It is

important to meet them where they are and help them so they can get enough control over their lives that they can focus on their child and their own learning.

Focus on the Parent Child Interaction - A program that simply provides preschool to parents who are enrolled in a GED program ignores the critical role that parents play in their child's life and learning. Successful dual generation programs intentionally incorporate parent and child together time during which parents learn and get to practice ways to support their child's learning. This helps parents bond with their child and gives them very practical help with things like how do you read to a child if no one ever read to you.

In closing, it is exciting that there is a dual generation learning bill being heard today. The issues facing low literacy parents and their children growing up in poverty are hard to solve.. So it is a fitting challenge for our new Office of Early Childhood to look at how we can braid together the various state resources of TANF, Care4kids, School Readiness, Adult Ed and job training funds to address this vexing problem.

One relatively small step that you could take now to support the existing dual generation programs would be to extend the exemption from the work requirement for the Care4Kids child care subsidy that currently exists for full time students under age 18, to also include older parents enrolled in a dual generational learning program certified by the Director of the Office of Early Childhood. This would add a relatively small group of families to the Care4kids program that ought to be doable under the existing allocation of funds but be it would a huge help to the dual generation programs that struggle to cover childcare costs while parents are in classes.

Thank you for listening and I will be happy to try to answer any questions.