

TESTIMONY OF THE
CONNECTICUT COALITION
FOR ***JUSTICE***
IN EDUCATION FUNDING
TO THE
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

March 3, 2014

Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and esteemed members of the Education Committee: The Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding appreciates this opportunity to submit comments pertinent to **Governor’s Bills No. 25, An Act Establishing the Office of Early Childhood, and No. 26, An Act Expanding Opportunities for Early Childhood Education.**

Governor Malloy’s continuing attention to early childhood education and its critical role in preparing children for success in school and in life is greatly appreciated, and we are pleased to speak today to the overall merits of directing improved policies and additional funding to improving the state’s delivery of essential education services to young children.

A large and ever-growing body of research shows that high-quality preschool education has substantial positive effects on young children’s learning and development, with lasting effects on cognitive abilities, school progress (e.g., grade repetition, special education placement, and high school graduation), and social behavior. Some research studies indicate that intensive, high-quality preschool programs alone could close half the achievement gap between minority and white children or low-income and other children through the end of high school.

However, the research evidence seems clear that if the long-term benefits of preschool are to be realized, the design and delivery of these programs must be of a sufficient quality to produce large initial impacts that place children on new, higher learning trajectories — and that the quality of teaching and learning in the public schools, especially in the early grades (K-3), must be simultaneously bolstered — if the investment in preschool programs is to overcome fade-out as children progress through school.

Thus, CCJEF cautions that however positive the provisions contained in Governors Bills 25 and 26 and the Governor’s proposed FY15 related budget adjustments may be, they are still insufficient for achieving the oft-quoted 7:1 return on investment in preschool programming. Moreover, adding 1,000 new slots represents but slow progress toward the universal preschool goal that the state should be aiming for in meeting its constitutional obligation to ensure education adequacy and equity for all. Universal “access,” wherein only the low-income children in Priority Districts, the 50 lowest-wealth communities, or districts that have a school

with greater than 40 percent poverty are afforded state subsidies, belies the fact that there are needy children who live in every community of the state and that, as with K-12 schooling, the best education takes place in racially and economically diverse settings.

Ensuring preschool program quality, attracting talented college-educated staff, providing sustained professional development, and remunerating fully credentialed teachers at a level comparable to that of the public schools doesn't come cheaply. Cost-effectiveness of the state's investment in preschool relies heavily on the level, predictability, and sustainability of state funding to help make quality programs feasible for providers and affordable for all families — and it means concomitant added investment in improving K-3 teaching and learning, as well as substantial investment in improvements all the way up the grades.

Do these bills and the proposed FY15 budget adjustments provide ample funding for the new Office of Early Childhood and to support and expand quality preschool programs? About the former we cannot say, but for high-quality preschool programs of 6 hours per day and 180 days per year, the costs estimated by research elsewhere yields estimates similar to per pupil spending on K-12 education, a funding approach that reportedly is used in a few states. Some even argue that preschool costs can be expected to exceed K-12 because providers and class sizes are smaller, health and screening services are more intense, the pool of qualified teachers is smaller, and specialized facilities are needed. For example, a 2007 cost function study predicted the cost of preschool for New Jersey's Abbott districts (arguably the most successful large-scale example of quality preschool programs, resulting from years of court-ordered remedies in adequacy/ equity litigation undertaken on behalf of that state's poorest urban communities); in today's dollars the cost was found to be \$13,639, and for private centers the unit cost was \$15,897 (Clive Belfield and Heather Schwartz, "The Cost of High-Quality Pre-School Education in New Jersey," Education Law Center, December 2007).

CCJEF v. Rell

In March 2010, on plaintiffs' appeal of an unfavorable pretrial ruling regarding adequacy claims, the Connecticut Supreme Court ruled in ***CCJEF v. Rell*** that the state constitution ensures the right of every Connecticut public school student to a quality (adequate) education, and the state must pay for it. The Court then remanded the case to Hartford Superior Court for trial on the merits of its adequacy and equity claims. That trial will commence on September 9, 2014, nine years after the case was initially filed.

Let us be clear: Neither the establishment of a single Office of Early Childhood and expanded opportunities for preschool education as described in these two bills, nor the education reforms that were enacted with great controversy and fanfare in 2012 and 2013, or any others that might yet be passed in 2014, are dispositive of the ***CCJEF v. Rell*** education funding lawsuit. While some of the mandated reforms may hold promise of future improvements in the quality of education afforded some (but not all) students, all the statutorily promised changes come too little, too late. All are subject to delay and distortion, as is already evident with the State's proposal to abandon its use of the newly revamped Education Cost Sharing formula, and none of the enacted or proposed reforms are adequately or equitably funded by the State.

Notwithstanding the vital importance of preschool in 21st century education, in September 2011 the State filed a motion in *CCJEF v. Rell* to exclude all facts or testimony that plaintiffs may offer relating to the education of preschool children. In the State's view, the Connecticut constitution does not extend education rights to children who are not of public elementary and secondary school age, even where those programs are integral components of public school districts. Plaintiffs vigorously oppose the State's position that preschool today is not an essential component of an adequate and equitable education — a position that is almost unfathomable given the proven educational benefits of preschool.

It seems fitting at this time to offer the Education Committee an excerpt from a not-yet-public report prepared for the CCJEF trial by Dr. W. Stephen Barnett of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University, an internationally recognized expert in early childhood education:

[A]dditional state investments in intensive, high-quality preschool education could make a significant contribution toward closing the extremely large educational achievement and attainment gaps for disadvantaged children in Connecticut. This will require significant reforms. Simply increasing enrollment in existing programs will not appreciably improve school readiness and subsequent academic success. Judging from the effects found for similar programs in the research literature, I conclude that Connecticut's state preschool program, as currently designed and funded, is too weak and provided to too few children to have a substantial and pervasive impact on school readiness and achievement....Other programs available to disadvantaged children are no substitute for a high-quality state-funded program....Many children who are not low-income could benefit from a strong state preschool program, as well.

Equality at the starting gate is imperative if we are to hold all children to increasingly high standards and expect them to graduate “career and college ready.”

Equality at the starting gate is also imperative if we are committed to closing the state's unconscionable achievement gap, reducing special education placement and grade repetition, and lessening the profound impact of poverty on children's academic success.

Moreover, equality at the starting gate is imperative if this state wishes to realize a plethora of economic and social gains over the lifetime of these preschoolers — gains that economists repeatedly point out accrue not just to high school graduates personally but also to local, state, and federal governments in the form of increased tax revenues and decreased expenditures for health, crime, welfare, and other social costs.

Inasmuch as the 2010 Supreme Court decision in the adequacy appeal explicitly states that the standard for what constitutes an adequate or suitable education is dynamic and dependent on the demands of an evolving world, we remain confident that preschoolers' education rights will be duly affirmed as protected under the Connecticut constitution.

Respectfully submitted,

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The Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding (CCJEF) is a broad-based coalition of municipalities, local boards of education, statewide professional education associations, unions, and other pro-education advocacy organizations, parents and schoolchildren aged 18 or older, and other concerned Connecticut taxpayers. Member communities are home to nearly half the state's public school students, including some three-fourths of all minority students, those from low-income families, and students from homes where English is not the primary language.