

Senator bye, Representative Walker and members of the Committee,

My name is Elaine Zimmerman. I am the Executive Director of the CT Commission on Children and am here today to speak on the Governor's Budget and S.B. 25, An Act Establishing the Office of Early Childhood.

Our state began school readiness policy with attention to low-income children in our poorest cities. The focus was on access, quality and supply. In 1997, our state stood out. We were the only state assuring care for both threes and four year olds, combining dollars between social services and education. We developed local school readiness councils and assured accreditation for school readiness slots. But the overall initiative was based on programs. It was not systemic, across all early care programs.

SB25 takes what our state began and brings it from program policy to a comprehensive system. The Office of Early Childhood brings all the programs serving young children together. It offers a continuum of services from birth to age eight, creates a coordinated early care and education system, and assures our teachers are well-trained and educated. It begins a data and accountability plan, oversees safety standards and the integration of home visitation and early care. This is the whole house approach.

Similarly, the Governor's budget offers more inspectors, provider rate increases, professional development, and quality enhancements. The budget and legislation begin to create a seamless system for young children, with growth and quality. The latter is imperative as early care and education is not, in and of itself, a panacea. Poor early care can do harm and good care helps children thrive.

Early care and education programs, if they are of quality, are equalizers. They level the skills set for formal schooling. The gap in achievement between low-income children and their middle-class peers is real and significant.

- Before entering kindergarten, the average cognitive scores of preschool-age children in the highest socioeconomic group are 60 percent above the average scores of children in the lowest socioeconomic group.
- At age 4 years, children who live below the poverty line are 18 months below what is normal for their age group; by age 10 that gap is still present. For children living in the poorest families, the gap is even larger.
- By the time children from middle-income families with well-educated parents are in third grade, they know about 12,000 words. Third grade children from low-income families with undereducated parents who don't talk to them very much have vocabularies of around 4,000 words, one-third as many words as their middle-income peers.

All children should have access to good care while their parents work or job train. But not all do. Often parents need to rely on neighbors, boyfriends, or older children to create a patchwork system of care.

Oral language development and pre-literacy are the bridge and precursors to language skills development in kindergarten and first grade. Yet, some children have families where reading together is not the daily norm due to language differences, level of adult literacy, and time shortages, juggling a few jobs to make ends meet.

Before entering formal education, children should:

- Have more than 1000 hours of experience with books, alphabet games, storybook reading and activities;
- Have been included in conversation and treated as successful speakers and listeners;
- Have engaged in playtime that employs symbols such as acting out roles, designing stories and using props;
- Be exposed to print and writing in their daily life.

Without the quality environments in child care where teachers are reading to children, the divide between those who have and those that do not, increases.

There is mounting evidence that intervention beginning during infancy or preschool age, has a greater impact on child outcomes and families than beginning to provide services at school age (Barnett and Escobar, 1990). In spite of federal mandates for early intervention, limitations in the identification process, diminish access to services (Meisels and Wasik), 1990).

Nationally, 11% of school age children receive special education services, 4.9% of preschool children receive special education services and only 1.6% of infants and toddlers receive early intervention services. These statistics indicate a significant need to improve early identification of children who are likely to require special education at school age. In spite of federal legislation for early intervention, we are not reaching most of the children and families who need help as early as we should.

There are other challenges to quality and supply. In some CT cities, a shortage of space and buildings exist, limiting access to care. Though our standards for early care are excellent, our oversight of the standards have ironically, been very poor. This has created opportunity for safety hazards and poor practices to prevail. We have not been visiting early care sites at least once a year, and studies have shown serious danger to young children.

A few suggestions:

- Build in explicit information for parents on choices and on quality. Let them know how they can partner with early care. Recent focus groups with families, performed by the Governor's Early Care and Education Cabinet, inform us that parents, in general, do not know about the resources available or how to choose good care from poor care, though every parent cares.
- Address English Language learners. With our growing demographics, there is no reference to ELL in this bill. Many families will simply not send their children to quality programs if the cultural sensitivity and language barriers are not met.

- Increase wages a bit further, if possible. Many providers leave the field to take other employment due to the low wages. In fact, when early care providers are trained, they often rapidly move into the public school system to garner improved salary and benefits. In other words, with quality training, we lose a large workforce. If we expect our providers to have a Bachelors Degree by 2020, we will need to raise wages further.
- Assure parity across systems. State funded centers need a bit more resources to be on a level playing field with the school readiness programs. About \$500,000 should be added to the Child Care Services line item, as the calculation factored in only 1/2 the total allocation to the State Funded Centers and did not include the half coming from a federal block grant.
- Make sure our early care providers are substantively trained in developmentally appropriate early literacy and math skills. With the largest achievement gap in reading in the states, we can be improving curriculum practice in pre-k as well as in our kindergarten through grade three classrooms. There is evidence across early learning settings that all children who are behind can make gains when they have teachers who know how to actively involve children in learning and have the appropriate supports.
- Consider a two generational strategy. Research shows that working on school readiness and workforce readiness together helps the whole family. Given that the number one indicator of a child's literacy is the literacy of the mother, we should consider adult education, GED and community college strategies for the early care children's parents. This would both help with poverty reduction and with optimal child development. Our TANF funds are allowable for this.
- Assure the bridge between infant toddler programming and preschool. Integrate training of home visitors and early care providers, where possible, so the field is better aligned and skills are learned for different ages and stages of a young child's development. Education reform efforts need to start as early as birth, and be continued through preschool.
- Develop preschool to grade three work around specific policies such as the achievement gap, social emotional behavior, executive functioning, early language and vocabulary. With a policy theme that is key to children's learning and that all teachers could put their arms around , the early care and kindergarten through grade three fields could be better aligned. An intentional curriculum is an important component of quality early learning and most effective when it is consistent with district-wide kindergarten through third grade (K-3) professional development activities and early learning standards.

- Weave the early care provider into the evolving focus and training on the achievement gap. It is not clear that the early care provider understands the impact of poverty, institutional racism or family stressors. Teachers need to have hands-on professional development and ongoing supports to better interact with low-income children to promote early learning.
- Assure full day kindergarten in the four Alliance districts that do not yet have full day kindergarten. As a pre k to third grade policy, we do our children poorly if they go from full day preschool to two hours of kindergarten.
- Stop parents from holding back their children from kindergarten to gain the edge in academics and sports. The issue in kindergarten is less the month of starting than the fact that parents who have resources choose to hold their children back so they are the smartest and the best athletes. Families who are poor must send their children to kindergarten because they cannot afford the early care alternative. So poor children are always the youngest. We need to disallow this, as New York State has done and limit the age that one can be in kindergarten on the back end, not at the front end.
- Utilize TANF dollars more aggressively for both school readiness and workforce readiness. I enclose a summary of our use of dollars and the opportunities that we do not fully utilize.

Closing the achievement gap is a large task requiring strategic planning and action at the classroom, local, state, and federal levels. For children in the highest-risk families and poorest communities, even the best early care and early learning opportunities will not be enough to help them perform on a level consistent with their more advantaged peers until there is a coordinated system, from infancy to grade three, of high expectations, shared training and quality throughout.

Thank you for your time.