

Testimony Education Committee

March 12, 2014

Submitted by Kathleen M. Queen, Wallingford Community Day Care Center, Inc

Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and Members of the Committee:

My name is Kathy Queen and I am the Director of the Wallingford Community Day Care Center, Inc. and also represent the State Funded Child Development Centers Director's Forum. The Forum represents the leadership of the State Funded Child Development Centers established pursuant to CGS 8-210. In 1968, Connecticut passed historic legislation making a long term commitment to support low and moderate income working families and children by financing a statewide network of quality child care centers. The law provides a Grant in Aid Program to municipalities, human service agencies and or non- profits to establish child day care centers to serve working families, and children disadvantaged by economic, social, or environmental conditions. Currently there are 102 centers in 53 municipalities serving approximately 5,000 children each year.

### **HB 5522 An Act Concerning School Readiness Funding**

I am here today to testify in support of HB 5522, An Act Concerning School Readiness Funding that seeks to raise the reimbursement rate for the School Readiness Grant. The proposed increase represents an increase of approximately 7.3% from the current rate and is a step in the right direction in acknowledging the true cost of quality pre-K as envisioned by the School Readiness Law. Focus on quality early learning experiences to address what we like to call the "preparation" gap for low income students is an important public policy initiative.

The vision of the law also takes into account the need for quality child care for working families and combines the two goals into a coordinated effort. Families can choose between full day, full year programs; half day school year programs or combinations that might work for families. Financing quality programs is difficult and programs rely on multiple sources of funding including the Care4Kids program; school readiness grants and parent fees. Unfortunately, the reimbursement rates for these state funded programs do not reflect the true cost of care and the additional cost associated with high program and staffing standards. Currently all School Readiness Programs must meet NAEYC accreditation standards and 50% of staff must hold an Associate's Degree in Early Childhood and 50% must have a BA in early childhood and or a BA and 12 credits in early childhood. This requirement increases to all teachers having a BA by 2020.

We have long supported these requirements and have made great strides in meeting these high standards. But we are at a cross roads and believe the rates need to keep pace with the actual cost if we are to sustain the program and maintain the highest quality expected by the School Readiness law. Programs struggle to maintain qualified teachers who hold degrees and find higher salaries in the public school settings. Quality pre-K in all settings, public and private, should have the same reimbursement rate in order to form a seamless, coordinated early care and education system.

SB 25 envisions the new Office of Early Childhood leading and developing a coordinated system of early care and education. This will be difficult if policy, budget and practices are not aligned cross sectors. Now is the time to plan for a true system and move toward parity to accomplish our state goal of universal pre-K for all students.

We appreciate the proposed rate increases in the child care subsidy program Care4Kids and for State Funded Centers in the Governor's budget and hope this is the beginning of a dialogue about sustainability as the process moves forward.

We applaud the Governor's vision of access to universal pre-K for children in CT and stand ready to assist the Legislature, Office of Early Childhood and the Governor in planning for the expansion in a manner that builds on the existing early care and education system and strengthens the program in all settings.

### **SB 424 An Act Concerning Access to Preschool Programs for Children in the Care and Custody of the Department of Children and Families.**

The Director's Forum supports the goals of the proposed legislation and the importance of access to quality pre-K for Connecticut's most vulnerable children. The School Readiness Grant is targeted toward priority and competitive school districts and governed by local and or regional School Readiness Councils. Foster children live in many cities and towns and not necessarily in School Readiness program districts.

To implement this type of policy flexibility in program guidelines, capacity, and additional costs to transport and pay the parent fees involved would have to become part of the DCF funding stream to subsidize the slot. Suggestions include: DCF would pay for a specific number of slots in programs to hold for DCF children. A similar partnership exists with DCF and some Head Start programs that works very well; foster parent subsidies should include child care dollars since many are not eligible for care4kids; DCF should increase support services to foster parents to meet the educational needs of children in care.

State Funded Centers work with DCF and serve many children in foster care. We believe this bill will foster more coordination and encourage more foster families to access quality pre-K. As the discussion evolves, we encourage you to include a broader conversation about access to quality child care for infants and toddlers to assist foster families who are working. This will increase the pool of foster families and contribute to the stability of placements for children. Thank you for your consideration of this testimony.