

Center for Children's Advocacy

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TESTIMONY OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY TO THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE IN SUPPORT OF SB 424, AN ACT CONCERNING ACCESS TO PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN IN THE CARE AND CUSTODY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

March 12, 2014

Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and Distinguished Members of the Education Committee:

We submit this testimony on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy, a nonprofit law firm that provides holistic legal services for poor children in Connecticut through individual representation and systemic advocacy.

We strongly support SB 424, An Act Concerning Access to Preschool Programs for Children in the Care and Custody of the Department of Children and Families. This bill would require the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to enroll each preschool-aged child committed to its care in high quality preschool, unless enrollment is found to be not in the child's best interest.

SB 424 is essential to ensuring that Connecticut's most vulnerable children --- children committed to the state due to abuse or neglect --- have equal opportunity to learn, play, grow and thrive. SB 424 is also essential to the well-being of the state as a whole. High-quality preschool has one of the highest documented "returns on investment" of any known public policy intervention; returns on investment are particularly high for "at risk" and traumatized children, who often need early intervention to develop the social, emotional, and cognitive skills necessary to succeed in kindergarten. Finally SB 424 is essential as a matter of principle. The State of Connecticut is not just metaphorically or symbolically the "parent" of the children committed to its care: it is the *legal* parent, with a monopoly on the education decision-making rights of these children. This is a case where private actors *cannot*, by definition, step in to fill the gap: DCF is -- as statutory parent of these children -- the only entity with the legal authority to enroll its children in preschool.

How many—and what percentage of—preschool-aged children in DCF custody are not currently enrolled in preschool?

According to DCF, approximately 220 (56 percent of the total 395 preschool-aged children committed to DCF as of September 1, 2013) are not enrolled in preschool.¹ It is possible that in practice—at least in some regions of Connecticut—DCF enrolls more children in preschool than this data suggests; however, without a credible reporting system, we cannot know for sure. There is also currently no way to know whether the programs in which DCF enrolls its children are of high quality. SB 424 seeks to remedy this by defining "eligible preschool programs" clearly and requiring DCF to document the child's enrollment (or the reasons why enrollment was not in the child's best interest) in each preschool-aged child's case plan.

Why is enrolling its children in high-quality preschool one of the most important duties DCF owes to the abused and neglected children in its care?

Extensive research shows that high-quality preschool is the single most cost-effective and important educational investment for children of all backgrounds.² However, preschool access is particularly critical for

¹See October 29, 2013 email from Fred North at DCF to Alexandra Dufresne. "Preschool-aged" refers to children ages 3-5 who are not enrolled in kindergarten or first grade. "Enrolled in preschool" for purposes of these figures includes children in Head Start and in center-based care, which may include center-based care that would not meet the definition of "high-quality preschool" contemplated by this bill. These figures, however, may not include children served by home-based childcare settings. In addition, in this correspondence, Mr. North notes, "Please note that there is a large group of kids in placement within this age range for whom we do not have any school data entered. This may not be a fact of missing data, just that they are not presently attending any form of preschool program; but it is impossible to tell the degree to which that is true without a case review. I took a look at about a half-dozen of these cases and didn't find any that were actually attending any program, though a couple of them were receiving B-3 services in the home (but not at a center-based program)."

²Preschool attendance is the most important factor contributing to kindergarten readiness. Preschool attendance is especially important and can make the greatest difference for low income and at-risk children. There is typically a large gap in kindergarten readiness between children who attended a high-quality preschool and those that did not. Children who attend high-quality preschool programs are more likely to be academically and socially prepared for kindergarten, have lower retention rates, are less likely to need special education services, and have higher high school



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abused and neglected children because of the effects of trauma on their social, emotional, and intellectual development. For this reason, there is consensus among early education experts that children in DCF care fall into the “highest priority” category of children who should be afforded high-quality preschool.

As early as third grade, abused and neglected children in DCF care have fallen behind their peers in educational achievement. For example, of the 58 third graders in foster care for whom valid 2013 CMT scores are available, 44 percent scored “below basic” on reading.³ The best way to inoculate abused and neglected children against educational failure is to ensure that they are enrolled in high-quality preschool. Indeed, 80 percent of all children in Connecticut enter kindergarten with preschool experience. (Rates range from 95.4 percent of children in DRG A districts to 67.4 percent of children in DRG I districts).⁴ To expect a child who has been abused and neglected to keep up with his peers—the majority of whom have had the benefit of preschool—without equal access to high-quality preschool flies in the face of recent data and research regarding the development of young children.

When a child is removed from her family and committed to the Department of Children and Families, the state becomes the *sole actor* with the legal authority to make educational decisions for the child. As the legal parent of the child, with a monopoly on educational decision-making rights, DCF has a special duty to ensure that the child’s educational needs are met.

Are there enough high-quality preschool slots in Connecticut for the approximately 220 children who are not enrolled in preschool?

Likely yes. Statewide, approximately 22,000 young children with high-needs already have access to high-quality prekindergarten programs, according to Connecticut’s Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant 2013 application.⁵ Children who are involved with DCF are currently afforded first priority for Head Start slots. Last year, of the 8,956 Head Start slots in Connecticut, only 168 slots went to children committed to DCF, while another 418 families in Head Start were receiving some type of child abuse and neglect services.⁶ Although high-quality slots are in very high demand in some regions, it is unlikely that DCF—by enrolling its children in the magnet school lotteries and working with local school districts, Head Start, and private providers—could not find a place for its remaining 220 preschool-aged children.⁷ The Governor’s proposal to provide high-quality preschool to almost all low-income children in Connecticut represents a wonderful—and ambitious—goal. Making sure that Connecticut ensures access to high-quality preschool for the relatively small number of preschool-aged children committed to its care is, in comparison, relatively easy to do.

graduation rates. See generally CYD OPPENHEIMER, TAMARA KRAMER & EDIE JOSEPH, CONNECTICUT VOICES FOR CHILDREN, CONNECTICUT EARLY CARE & EDUCATION PROGRESS REPORT, 2013 4 (2013), available at <http://www.ctvoices.org/sites/default/files/ece13progressreport.pdf>; DEBRA ACKERMAN & STEVEN BARNETT, NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR EARLY EDUCATION RESEARCH, PREPAREDNESS FOR KINDERGARTEN: WHAT DOES “READINESS” MEAN? 12 (2005), available at <http://nieer.org/resources/policyreports/report5.pdf>; MILAGROS NORES & STEVE BARNETT, THE ECONOMICS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS: LASTING BENEFITS AND LARGE RETURNS (Nat’l Inst. for Early Education Research ed., 2013), available at http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/Economics%20of%20ECE_Loyola_Nores.pdf (discussing the effects of preschool as seen in multiple studies across the nation).

³ See CMT and CAPT 2013 scores for children in DCF care, reported by the State Department of Education, on file with authors.

⁴ CYD OPPENHEIMER, TAMARA KRAMER & EDIE JOSEPH, CONNECTICUT VOICES FOR CHILDREN, CONNECTICUT EARLY CARE & EDUCATION PROGRESS REPORT, 2013 15 (2013), available at <http://www.ctvoices.org/sites/default/files/ece13progressreport.pdf>.

⁵ Dannel P. Malloy, Myra Jones-Taylor, Race to the Top Application for Initial Funding, Early Learning Challenge, (Fall 2013), p. 153

⁶ See October 2, 2013 email from Grace Whitney, Director, Connecticut Head Start State Collaboration Office, Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, to Alexandra Dufresne (citing Head Start Program Information Report for 2013). See also November 4, 2013 email from Fred North, DCF, to Alexandra Dufresne (stating that the percentage of committed children aged 4 in Head Start is less than 20 percent).

⁷ Early learning programs in Connecticut are already serving thousands of children with high-needs. See generally Connecticut Race to the Top Application, Early Learning Challenge 28–30 (2013), available at http://ctmirror.dev.cshp.co/cms/assets/uploads/2011/12/Aconnecticut_rtt-elc_application.pdf. For specific data, please see the following chart:

Number of Children (Age 3 until Kindergarten Entry) with High-Needs in Early Learning and Development Programs in Connecticut	
State Funded Preschool	8,913
Head Start	6,301
Funded by IDEA Part C and Part B, Section 619	4,666
Funded Under Title I of IDEA	3,714
Funded by State’s Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)	7,404
Family Resource Centers	3,028
Child Day Care Centers	2,481
Children’s Trust Fund	1,203

How much would this bill cost?

If DCF were paying out-of-pocket for an additional 220 slots, the total cost would be approximately 1.83 million dollars (220 x \$8,346 per year per student, which represents the approximate cost per year of one year-round School Readiness slot).⁸ However, there are reasons to believe that state funded or federally funded preschool slots may already exist for some of these children. In addition, as noted above, it is possible that the data from DCF understate the number of committed children already enrolled in preschool. If so, this suggests that additional costs to the state may be less than the 1.83 million dollar figure.⁹

What are the expected short-term cost savings from funding this initiative?

Data regarding preschool experience before kindergarten and retention rates indicates that an increase in high-quality preschool education before kindergarten leads to lower kindergarten retention rates.¹⁰ The average cost to educate a student in kindergarten in Connecticut is approximately \$14,961,¹¹ while the cost to educate a student in preschool is only \$8,346 per year.¹² Therefore, every student that is not retained because he was prepared for kindergarten through a high-quality preschool program saves the state \$6,615.¹³ By ensuring that DCF committed children are enrolled in high-quality preschool programs, these children will begin school more prepared for the challenges of kindergarten and are less likely to be retained, thus saving the state money.

What are the expected long-term cost savings from funding this initiative?

Investments in early childhood education yield high returns and leading economists believe that every dollar invested in high-quality preschool education leads to seven dollars back to society.¹⁴ Studies have shown that when disadvantaged and at risk children receive high-quality preschool services, they are more likely to graduate high school, less likely to commit crimes, and make an average of \$5,500 more per year at age forty than their similarly situated peers who did not attend preschool.¹⁵ In one study over a forty year span, data shows that for the \$15,166 invested in each child for high-quality preschool, the total public benefit was \$195,621, taking into account education savings, taxes on earnings, welfares savings, and crime savings.¹⁶

⁸ See CONNECTICUT STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCHOOL READINESS OVERVIEW 2, available at <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/DEPS/Readiness/sroverview.pdf> (the cost of one year-around School Readiness slot is \$8,436). NEED TO CITE TO HIGHER PRIVATE MARKET SLOT FROM VOICES'S TESTIMONY?

⁹ Currently, some public school preschool programs provide transportation. According to the Connecticut Association of Foster Parents (CAFAP), it is the norm for foster parents of young children to transport the children to preschool.

¹⁰ In Connecticut's poorest districts (DRG I), the percentage of kindergarten students with preschool experience is the lowest in the state at 67.4%, while the retention rate is the highest in the state at 7.48%. In Connecticut's wealthiest districts (DRG A), the percentage of kindergarten students with preschool experience is the highest in the state at 95.4%, while the retention is the lowest in the state at 1.4%. CYD OPPENHEIMER, TAMARA KRAMER & EDIE JOSEPH, CONNECTICUT VOICES FOR CHILDREN, CONNECTICUT EARLY CARE & EDUCATION PROGRESS REPORT, 2013 15 (2013), available at <http://www.ctvoices.org/sites/default/files/ccc13progressreport.pdf>. DRG I includes Bridgeport, Hartford, New Britain, New Haven, New London, Waterbury, and Windham. DRG A includes Darien, Easton, New Canaan, Redding, Ridgefield, Weston, Westport, Wilton, and District No. 9.

¹¹ See CONNECTICUT STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, 2012-2013 NET CURRENT EXPENDITURES PER PUPIL (2013), available at <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/dgm/report1/basiccon.pdf>. This report listed the net current expenditures per pupil by school district. To arrive at this number, take the total net current expenditures per pupil (\$2,483,538) and divide it by 166 (the number of school districts included in the report).

¹² See CONNECTICUT STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCHOOL READINESS OVERVIEW 2, available at <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/DEPS/Readiness/sroverview.pdf> (the cost of one year-around School Readiness slot is \$8,436).

¹³ The cost to educate a retained child for two years of kindergarten is approximately \$29,922 (\$14,961 per year multiplied by two), while the cost to educate a child in high-quality preschool is \$8,436 and one year of kindergarten is \$14,961, for a total of \$23,307.

¹⁴ See ART ROLNICK & ROB GRUNEWALD, MINNEAPOLIS FEDERAL RESERVE BANK, EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT WITH A HIGH PUBLIC RETURN 1 (2003), available at http://www.minneapolisfed.org/publications_papers/studies/earlychild/abc-part2.pdf; James E. Heckman et al., *The Rate of Return to the HighScope Perry Preschool Program*, 94 J. PUB. ECON. 114 (2010), available at http://heckman.uchicago.edu/sites/heckman.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/Heckman_etal_2010_RateofRtn-to-Perry.pdf (analyzing the data from the Perry Preschool Project to determine a cost/benefit ratio).

¹⁵ See MILAGROS NORES & STEVE BARNETT, THE ECONOMICS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS: LASTING BENEFITS AND LARGE RETURNS (Nat'l Inst. for Early Education Research ed., 2013) available at http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/Economics%20of%20ECE_Loyola_Nores.pdf (discussing the effects of preschool as seen in multiple studies across the nation); *Lifetime Effects: The HighScope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*, HIGHSCOPE (2005), <http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=219>.

¹⁶ *Lifetime Effects: The HighScope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*, HIGHSCOPE (2005), <http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=219>.

In light of the evidence above, we strongly support SB 424 with only minor, technical revisions.¹⁷

Respectfully Submitted,

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¹⁷ We respectfully suggest that Section 1(a)(2)(D), "a school readiness program that is part of a Head Start program" be changed to "a Head Start program." This is because all school readiness programs are already captured in Section 1(a)(2)(A) and because there exist some Head Start programs that are not part of school readiness programs. We also respectfully suggest that Section 1(a)(2)(B) be amended to include the phrase "or a regional educational service center" after the phrase "a local or regional board of education."