

Testimony of Jessica Stewart

Middletown School Readiness/Discovery Council

Before the Human Services Committee

March 12, 2015, SB 1044

Senator Moore, Representative Abercrombie, and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Jessica Stewart and I am the School Readiness Coordinator for Middletown, overseeing the programs with State funds currently serving approximately 450 children birth to age five.

I am testifying today about the need for an increase in wages for early care teachers. This is an issue which is very important to me. I have been in the Early Childhood field since 1997 when I graduated with my Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education. My first job was as a toddler assistant teacher making \$8.10 an hour. Here I stand 18 years later and the starting hourly wage is no hire for this position, especially with now degree. I lived at the poverty level in 1997, and if we look at the cost of living increase since then, I would still be living in poverty today. I would not have the ability to pay for my basic needs never mind saving for my future. In fact the hourly wage for Qualified Teachers working with CT's most vulnerable children is between \$12 and \$14 an hour. This wage qualifies the majority of these teachers for State assistance, and still leaves them living paycheck to paycheck with an inability to save for emergencies and no ability to save for retirement.

As of July 1, 2015, legislation will mandate State Funded programs have 50% of teachers with a Bachelor's Degree and the other 50% with an Associate's Degree. It is looking like CT will meet this goal; however, programs will NOT be able to compensate those who have increased their education to meet the degree requirements with higher wages, and will not get close to providing them with a living wage. In fact, many of the teachers in Middletown are working multiple jobs just to pay their bills and to cover the costly tuition of the required degree program.

I have witnessed talented early care teachers leave the field and speak to many who have not even considered going into the field, which is disheartening at best. Without the individuals who have dedicated themselves to this field, early care programs across CT will be forced to close their doors, thus leaving hundreds of families without access to the high quality care their children deserve. In turn, this could create a domino effect with more and more families relying on State assistance to make ends meet. I want to see programs be able to retain and pay a living wage to all of their qualified and educated teaching staff who have dedicated themselves to caring for CT's most vulnerable children during the most critical time of their development. As a mother of two children and as an expert in early childhood development, I know how important

it is for every child to build a strong bond with an adult in their life. For many of CT's children this bond, this amazing connection, is with their first teachers.

Please help us move forward in continuing to professionalize the field of early childhood education by ensuring appropriate compensation for the thousands of teachers who work tirelessly every day to ensure the best care for our youngest and most vulnerable citizens; Connecticut's future.

Thank you.

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