Testimony of Niloufar Rezai
to the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly in Opposition HB 6825
regarding cuts to the Office of Early Childhood

April 22, 2015

Dear Chairpersons and Elected Officials,

Please accept my written testimony in opposition of the proposed reductions in funding for the Office of Early Childhood. These cuts negatively impact Connecticut's most vulnerable and valuable resource: young children, especially those from lower income families.

As an administrator of the State's leading early childhood education program, both for young children and in the area of teacher preparation, I attest firsthand to the value of quality early experiences for children, especially those of lower economic backgrounds such as our children of Windham/Willimantic. Through subsidies such as Care4Kids and School Readiness, Willimantic children, among the poorest in the State, have access to quality education in economically and ethnically diverse classrooms with qualified teachers.

This week, as we celebrate the Week of the Young Child, I urge you to reconsider the impact these recessions have on Connecticut's young children ages birth to 8. Consider the value of providing quality care and early education to ALL of Connecticut's young children. Connecticut, one of the wealthiest states, sadly has the largest academic achievement gap between children of upper and lower socio-economic ranks. Children from lower economic realms lack the access and opportunity to quality early education leading to a gap before the first day of kindergarten!

Research surrounding the achievement gap underscores the value of quality early academic experiences for young children in later academic success. Children from economically challenged homes must be front-loaded with rich experiences in order to be able to keep up with their more affluent counterparts.

A recent study at Stanford University notes children's vocabulary skills are linked to their economic backgrounds. By 3 years of age, there is a 30 million word gap between children from the wealthiest and poorest families. A recent study shows that the vocabulary gap is evident in toddlers. By 18 months, children in different socio-economic groups display dramatic differences in their vocabularies. By 2 years, the disparity in vocabulary development has grown significantly (Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder 2013). There is countless research data supporting similar findings including work conducted at Eastern Connecticut State University's Center for Early Childhood Education. A three-year federal Early Reading First research grant, conducted in Windham, leads to similar findings (http://www.easternct.edu/cece/inspiring_lessons.html).

The data is clear: children who lack access to quality preschool (commonly the poor) begin kindergarten behind their peers who have had such experiences. Young children who receive

quality early learning experiences fair better academically, socially, emotionally, and physically. There is increasing evidence that Connecticut's high quality school readiness programs:

- prepare children for kindergarten.
- decrease the numbers of children held back in kindergarten and first grade,
- decrease the need for elementary school special education, and
- reduce early reading gaps.

Through subsidies such as the School Readiness grant program and Care4Kids, we are able to provide much needed access to preschool for children of socially, economically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

At quality early childhood programs, young children demonstrate gains in the following areas essential for school success:

- Literacy: increased vocabulary and oral language providing an ability to express themselves, ask and answer questions, read, and write.
- Gains in numeracy skills: an ability to quantify, use words such as more/less, the same as…
- A growing ability to self-regulate, manage emotions, resolve conflict, and cooperate with peers,
- An increased ability and aptitude to engage in scientific inquiry, make predictions, test predictions, think critically, and use technology,
- Gains in physical development through increased opportunities to engage in gross motor activities, and
- exposure to opportunities to be creative through music, art, performance.

We have the privilege to see first-hand children such as 3 year old Meghan who came to the Center through the Care4Kids subsidy. Meghan's mother was making well below the poverty level and without the subsidy, would not be able to afford a quality program to offer her child an even start. Meghan exhibited developmental delays in areas such as physical development, lacked oral language and exhibited minimal ability to engage socially. With support from qualified teachers, Meghan exited the program with an ability to interact with peers, express herself verbally, write her name, and maneuver swiftly on the climbing walls! These significant gains have allowed Meghan to begin kindergarten at or above the level of her peers.

Or, the 3 year Jonas who spent two years in preschool, arriving here with no language, with a mother who reached out and accepted guidance on how to support her child at home. Jonas now excels in his kindergarten class according to his teacher. There are numerous stories of success such as these which we can share.

The success stories of the children noted above and hundreds of others each year would not be possible without state funding for quality early childhood programs. Support for access and

opportunity to quality preschool education is the key to helping all of Connecticut's children succeed giving them all, regardless of economics, an equitable start to becoming life-long learners.

There are numerous factors to a successful preschool experience such as, but not limited to:

- Diversity within classroom: economic, cultural, linguistic, and ability
- Teacher education and preparedness: Just as research has shown, quality translates to teacher education and preparedness to support children's learning and development and to work with diverse populations.
- Finally: Outreach families (such as workshops on supporting their child's literacy development, getting books and literacy materials into their homes)

The proposed recessions to the Office of Early Childhood will negatively impact opportunity, access, and quality of necessary early childhood care. I urge that we invest in early education and make *every* week the week of the young child.