

Testimony of Kimberly Martini-Carvell, MA

Associate Vice President, Early Childhood & Family Development Programs

The Village for Families & Children

Before the Education Committee, March 11, 2015

Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Kimberly Martini-Carvell. I am honored to lead multiple early childhood education, mental health and home visiting programs serving approximately 600 families with young children 6 and under in the Greater Hartford region – at The Village for Families & Children.

I'm here today to speak in favor of two bills: S.B. 1053 AN ACT PROHIBITING OUT-OF SCHOOL SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION FOR STUDENTS IN PRESCHOOL AND GRADES KINDERGARTEN TO TWO, and

S.B. 1058 AN ACT CONCERNING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM.

It is not a coincidence that these two bills are simultaneously before the committee today, as they are correlated. Currently, our education system is at a loss for how to manage children – especially young children - with challenging behaviors. This has led to an almost 20% increase in the number of children suspended from Kindergarten and First Grade in our highest need communities. These children will, if not already, be the children with serious issues of chronic absenteeism.

The foundation for academic success, economic productivity and a lifetime of sound health is laid down in the early years of children's lives. It is critical to identify and address developmental, behavioral, and psychosocial issues in young children as early as possible for optimal child development¹. According to the literature, 12 to 16 percent of children below age three in the United States have developmental delay in at least one area including behavioral health; yet as many as one-half of affected children will not be identified by the time they enter kindergarten. Physical and mental health related issues, alone or in combination, account for all but 6% of the children each year who are not ready for kindergarten.² Children living below the poverty line are 1.3 times more likely to have developmental delays or behavioral problems than those not living in poverty.³ In urban centers, like Hartford, with a high

¹ Shonkoff, J. From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development, 2000

² Macrides, P., DO, Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, Quincy Family Medicine Residency Program, Quincy, Illinois, Ryherd, S. Ed.M, Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, Center for Clinical Research, Springfield, Illinois, "Screening for Developmental Delay", *American Family Physician*. 2011 Sep 1;84(5):544-549

³ Alliance For Excellent Education, U.S. Census, National Center for Education Statistics, The New York Times, American Graduate

percentage of children facing a number of adverse childhood experiences, including poverty, the rate of developmental delays is up to 32%.

We know these children. I know these children. Nearly 70% of the children at The Village Early Learning Center have been expelled from a preschool program, sometimes three or more times. These children struggle with managing their emotions and wrestle with impulsivity. Many of them have developmental delays and/or mental health challenges. Without a timely intervention, these 3 and 4 year olds at the Early Learning Center will be the children being suspended in Kindergarten and first grade and later on chronically truant.

Three years ago, Ruiz's mother came to The Village seeking help. Her son had been registered in 5 different preschool programs in the City of Hartford prior to his fourth birthday. He had not been enrolled more than 3 months at the longest and 3 weeks at the shortest in any preschool program prior to The Village Early Learning Center. Previous centers reported to the staff that Ruiz was "difficult to manage – aggressive or withdrawn from his peers – impulsive and not likeable." His mother Angela was determined to find a program that would work with her son and help him learn to "not be like his big brother." Angela told us that she lost several jobs because of her older son's behavior issues (and having to be picked up from school) and feeling abandoned by the very people (the teachers and administration) she desperately needed help from. She struggles with earning just enough to live on and can't lose the job she has now. Ruiz needs to learn how to succeed in school, make friends and respect his peers and teachers – for both his and his family's well being.

Ruiz and his mother Angela weren't different than most of the families at The Village Early Learning Center. What's different at The Village is that suspension and expulsion are not an option. Our highly trained, empathic and skilled teaching staff worked with a team (mental health clinician, developmental specialist and case manager) to craft a support plan for Ruiz's academic and social emotional success. Together, small incremental steps were made that would ensure Ruiz would be successful in elementary school.

Today, Ruiz is in second grade at a magnet school in Hartford. Recently he won a "perfect attendance" award (for the past three months of school). Angela, his mother, continues to bring him to a play therapist at The Village every other week for treatment. Ruiz's transition to elementary school was not perfect, but his Kindergarten teacher reports that he was the most prepared for the environment and challenges.

We need to reach vulnerable children before they enter Kindergarten. At-risk or developmentally vulnerable children need to be assessed for developmental delays and social emotional challenges. Waiting until the child's first suspension is too late and the cost of the support needed for that child, TOO GREAT. We know that success in the early years paves the way for long term academic success. We must rethink the intervention and prevention of suspension of young children and chronic absenteeism. Prevention and intervention begins in early childhood.

Thank you.

