

Testimony for Hearing on Governor's Budget

Office of Early Childhood

Public Hearing Appropriations

Submitted by :

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The Honorable Senator, Beth Bye
The Honorable Representative, Toni E. Walker
Co-Chairmen, Appropriations Committee

Dear Chairman Bye , Chairman Walker, Ranking Members- Senator Robert Kane and Representative Melissa Ziobron, and Committee Members:

I am writing to oppose the \$12 million overall cuts to the Office of Early Childhood (\$4 million in direct cuts and \$8 million in underfunding of Birth to Three). I understand the need to cut but I feel that cuts to the OEC Budget will cost us more in the future. We now understand how quickly the brain develops at an early age and how important it is to support early childhood education as well as the health and nurturing of our youngest citizens.

I also do not support the block grant approach to the budget. When all programs are lumped into one Office of Early Childhood Budget, it erases transparency. Without guidelines for the agencies to set and publicize their budget decisions, local programs would be left in the dark as to how to proceed to serve children. I would like to speak specifically to one area in the OEC budget that has had a very positive effect on the Town of Coventry.

I am Co-Chair of Coventry's School Readiness Committee as well as a member of the of the STEPS Collaborative. Over the last few years, Coventry's STEPS Collaborative has received between \$18,000 and \$21,000 annually from the State of Connecticut. We particularly do not wish to have any cuts made to this area of the OEC budget.

I believe that because of this funding that provided the Collaborative with the ability to communicate the importance of early childhood education to the community, our pre-school program serving over 100 children was moved from the basement of a church where it had been for over 50 years to renovated classrooms as well as new facilities at our middle school. The relocation to the middle school also enabled us to apply and receive a Smart Start grant and add two additional classrooms.

Without this funding, we would not have come together to produce the Community Plan for Early Childhood. I strongly believe this funding is essential to the continued implementation and updating to our plan. Without funding, we will have no resources for data collection, publications, community events and engagement, and most importantly the staff that provides leadership. These losses would

make it very difficult for the Collaborative to continue. We are the only group in town that is focused on this particular age group.

Another important area of the OEC budget that has had a very positive impact on the Town of Coventry is the School Readiness grant. Because of this grant and the assistance with tuition that it provides, many children who otherwise would not have been able to attend our early childhood program were enrolled and thrived. We are seeing the positive impact this has made as they move forward to kindergarten and beyond.

There is still much to be done. As a former State Representative, I know you have a tough job before you, but I hope that you will give a high priority to the full funding of the budget for the Office of Early Childhood as you move forward with your deliberations.

Thank you for your consideration.

Joan A. Lewis