

Testimony

Mindy D'Andrea, East Hartford School Readiness Administrator

Before the Education Committee,

February 23, 2016

RE: Bill 5306 An Act Concerning Recommendations of the Office of Early Childhood

Representative Fleischman, Senator Slossberg and members of the Committee,

I am the East Hartford School Readiness Administrator and am submitting this testimony to reject the language change in bill 5306 related to the regional accreditation projects (AFP) in Section 6 (see below):

Sec. 6. Section 17b-749e of the general statutes is repealed and the following is substituted in lieu thereof (*Effective July 1, 2016*):

The Office of Early Childhood shall, [establish and fund five regional accreditation projects, within available appropriations. The office shall select qualified applicants for each region through a request for proposal process. The office shall give priority to child day care facilities where at least twenty per cent of the children live with families earning less than seventy-five per cent of the state median income level] within available appropriations, support programs providing child care services to achieve accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The office shall set priorities for receipt of support under this section.

The Accreditation Facilitator Project (AFP) has been in existence since 1998 and is based regionally throughout Connecticut. The AFP helps support early care and education programs who wish to go through the NAEYC accreditation process, an accreditation that is mandated for all early care and education programs receiving state funding. The AFP offers support services on site for programs, as well as localized workshops which pertain to the NAEYC accreditation process. East Hartford School Readiness contracts with the AFP on an annual basis to offer workshops and professional development to the early care and education community, public school preschools, and Head Start programs. All East Hartford School Readiness programs are NAEYC Accredited and the services offered through the AFP in coaching, workshops, and professional development help maintain these quality programs for the community and families of East Hartford. The loss of these supports for programs will be detrimental to them in maintaining NAEYC Accreditation, and costly since they will have to hire outside contractors to provide onsite supports and workshops. A service that will be difficult for the programs - - community and public school.

East Hartford Early Care and Education Programs rely on the AFP system in order to deliver the high quality early childhood services sought after by parents in order to have their children better prepared for kindergarten. All program staff from School Readiness, Smart Start, Head Start, and private community programs has utilized the AFP services throughout our ten year

involvement. Without AFP, the East Hartford programs would not be able to carry out the requirements from the Office of Early Childhood (OEC). Early Care and Education staff would not be able to receive the coaching services in order to ensure their classrooms are of high quality. Teachers in the early childhood field would not be able to learn the cutting education practices without taking even more funding out of their meager paychecks. Early Care program directors and principals would not be able to better understand the world of early childhood without the services offered to them through AFP leadership trainings. The public school programs would not be able to collaborate with the community programs at joint workshops to ensure all children in East Hartford early education programs are ready for kindergarten. And the East Hartford early care and education programs would lose the progress that has been made if they have to utilize service providers that do not understand the history and trajectory of the advancements made thanks to the AFP consultants individualization. Services would be fragmented and cookie cutter - - as we no one size does not fit all.

Connecticut ranks 3rd in the nation for the number of NAEYC accredited programs, and through the AFP has built a strong and trusting relationship with NAEYC which has allowed programs to keep their NAEYC staffing report updated through the Connecticut Charts A Course Teacher Registry; an agreement made based upon the work of current staff. A change in funding and supports will jeopardize this long standing relationship Connecticut AFP has built with NAEYC.

100% of the East Hartford School Readiness Programs and over 90% of the NAEYC accredited programs in Connecticut have been supported by the AFP. Many programs funded since 1998 have used the AFP for not only initial accreditation supports, but also re-accreditation supports on multiple occasions. The AFP is open to all licensed child care centers wishing to obtain NAEYC accreditation, not just State funded programs. These free supports help programs improve the quality of care being offered to families and children throughout CT. Of the current NAEYC programs 70% of them funded with State Office of Early Childhood dollars.

The Office of Early Childhood has made the decision to award the Quality Improvement Funding to the United Way of Connecticut, to be the sole operator. The contract with the United Way is not finalized yet and state regulations do not allow the OEC to dictate that the United Way subcontract AFP services to the current agencies which have been delivering services since 1998. This includes the four RESCs (Regional Education Service Centers) and one community college: EDUCATION CONNECTION, LEARN, CREC, EASTCONN, and Gateway Community College. The bid was not put through an RFP process.

When questioned about the procedures on this it was stated the OEC spent approximately 18 months maneuvering through OPM and the Attorney General's office for this change to be a sole source contract. National QIS experts expressed to the OEC that an effective QIS system could not successfully operate outside the parameters of a state's child care resource and referral agency. This plan has been under consideration for approximately 2 years with no communication to the parties involved until this time: with only six months left to the current contract. The State Funded Early Care and Education programs, where not contacted to talk about how a sole source contract for the QIS would benefit, and/or hurt their ability to access supports for NAEYC accreditation, workshops and/or teacher scholarships.

Twice annually the AFP has an application process to select programs for support services. While no site can be selected into the AFP if they are operating under a consent order received within the past 18 months, many programs enter the AFP with few systems in place and lag significantly in their understanding of early childhood best practices. Furthermore, many programs up for renewal selected into the AFP are programs with new leadership and/or high turnover: both features pose a challenge to maintaining high quality and AFP services are a significant asset to help them in that area.

The current AFP system is well poised to provide quality improvement assistance to early childhood settings at ALL levels of quality: therefore, it could be expanded upon to deliver the wide array of services that have been outlined in the most current CCDF plan.

While the OEC does not want there to be a disruption of services when this current fiscal year ends, they do not want the AFP to hold a 2016 Spring Selection and bring additional programs into the process. To demonstrate the impact this would have, there are over 100 currently NAEYC Accredited programs who will not be able to apply to receive re-accreditation support if the spring 2016 selection is eliminated.

Connecticut's draft CCDF plan contains the following statement: "The QIS will provide cohort based supports including monthly meetings and individualized on-site assistance to licensed center-based providers; and free training and technical assistance to achieve performance of NAEYC's 10 Program Standards to all settings." These activities are in alignment with the current AFP; this bill proposes to eliminate the current AFP system.

I thank you for your consideration of my request to maintain the services and supports under the AFP offices. The CT AFP supports have been invaluable to Connecticut's Early Care and Education programs since 1998 and an irreplaceable service to the East Hartford Early Care and Education Community that has allowed us to successfully provide quality child care and education to East Hartford families.

Thank you,
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