

State Funded Child Development Centers Directors Forum

Testimony on HB 5557

An Act Concerning Recruitment and Retention of Early Childhood Teachers

“Increasing the employability and stability of parents reduces the impact of poverty on children and sustains our nation’s workforce and economy” (CCDBG guidance, 2015)

Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann and Members of the Committee:

My name is Mary Cecchinato and I am the Director at Torrington Child Care Center. I am here today to applaud the Education Committee for raising HB 5557 that for the first time will acknowledge and address the low compensation for teachers in State Funded Child Development Centers and School Readiness Programs subject to the education credentials and program accreditation in CGA 10-16p.

The bill would require the Office of Early Childhood to increase reimbursement rates to phase in a compensation schedule to raise teacher salaries to help recruit and retain qualified teachers. With the current budget crisis, we ask that within the funding streams for publically funded child care and pre-school programs that raising salaries be made a priority.

I have worked at the Torrington Child Care Center Inc. for over 30 years. I have staff who have been working at the program for over 35 years. My senior teacher, after 35 years, is making \$32,000.00 a year. Due to regulations I need to hire teachers with a BA in Early Childhood from an approved college. I had an opening and was lucky enough to find someone who has an Early Childhood Degree. She accepted the job at \$14.50 an hour. After she accepted the job I found out she is not from an OEC approved college. She now needs to do more work to receive her ECTC before she qualifies. This is happening at many centers in the state. I truly believe in quality and that teachers who are well educated increase the quality of a program, but when you cannot offer a competitive salary hiring is very hard. Our center is very important to the families in Torrington. We have 48 children enrolled and a waiting list of at least 25 children. Some will not be three years old until Sept. 2017.

Why this Bill is so important:

Connecticut State Funded Child Development Centers (CDC’s), established by state statute, have provided early care and education each year to over 4000 birth to school age children of low and moderate income working parent families daily since 1968. Our programs are subject to the requirements in CGS 10-16p including 50% of our teachers must have a BA in Early Childhood from an OEC approved college by 2017 and 100% of teachers must have a BA by 2020. All of our programs must be NAEYC accredited thus meeting the highest national standards. Centers blend many funding streams including state child care grants, Care4Kids, parent fees and in many programs School Readiness Grants.

In State Funded Centers, reimbursement rates for infants and toddlers remains the same as preschool in spite of the fact that infant/toddler programs cost nearly double what preschool costs due to smaller class sizes and more than double the staff/child ratio (4/1 vs. 10/1.) In addition, the cost of preschool is estimated at \$12,000-\$15,000 per child far above the current reimbursement rate of \$ 8600. Note School Readiness pre-school programs received an increase in reimbursement rates to \$8900 per slot in the 2015-16 budget. State Funded Centers did not. Teachers in both programs are subject to the same requirements including infant toddler teachers. This disparity needs to be addressed in the short term to prevent even more disparity among programs.

The Office of Early Childhood just released "A Plan to Assist Early Education State Funded Providers to Degree Attainment and Increased Compensation." The Bill before you seeks to embed in State policy the goals and objectives of the plan and require the Office to phase in a fair and equitable wage scale to achieve parity with public school teachers with the same degrees. The Plan states; "the average salary based on program setting is \$53,045 for public school pre-K teachers and \$33,939 for community based providers. "

It's not rocket science to see that this disparity makes it impossible to retain qualified teachers in the community setting when wages are so much higher in the public schools. Add in the lack of health benefits and retirement plans, incentives are just not there to stay teaching in a community program.

The families we serve are below 50% of the poverty level and cannot afford increased fees. We are subject to the fee schedule set by the state and limited in finding additional funding. We are the first line of defense for helping families out of poverty. The recent Alice Report by the United Way of Connecticut (Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed, 2016), reports that child care is 28% of monthly expenses for working families. Factor in housing costs at over 30% of household income and what does a family have left to live on?

The bill before you focuses on publically funded programs subject to high quality standards for teachers and programs. It does not include at this time the overall wage crisis for the broader child care field and the need for a higher minimum wage for all workers. We believe the state must act now so we stabilize our community programs that are essential to working families. Research is clear that lost work hours for unreliable child care has a negative impact on the economy. (Report from the President's Council of Economic Advisors, benefits include increased parental earnings and employment; and long term gains for children's growth and development)

Where Will the Funding Come From?

The Governor challenges us to leverage shrinking resources and set priorities for funding. We offer the following ideas on how to cut spending at the Office of Early Childhood and focus on funding direct child care to families and improved wages for teachers:

1. Focus on quality childcare for working parents:
There should be a temporary moratorium on new slots to be allocated for Smart Start, School Readiness, or any other preschool program. Funding in the budget for those new slots should be repurposed to maintain and augment reimbursement rates to increase wages to stabilize the child care industry.

2. Reduce funding for expansion of the Quality Improvement System and focus on direct services to children and families. State Funded Centers are required to be NAEYC accredited and teachers must have BA degrees by 2020. Extending Quality Improvement measures (QIS) to all child care settings stretches scarce resources and should be delayed until appropriate dollars are put into the system.
3. Establish equity among all state early childhood programs including those offered by local school districts relative to rates, requirements, parent fees, data collection, etc.
4. Delay implementation of costly regulations in the new State Child Care Plan. CT relies on the Child Care Development Block Grant, known as Care4Kids, to fund child care in all types of settings: state funded centers; family child care; and kith and kin.

In summary, State Funded Child Development Centers and School Readiness programs serve low and moderate income families and the dedicated front line teachers need to be compensated in a fair and equitable manner. We ask that the Legislature support HB 5557 and direct the Office of Early Childhood to make this a budget priority. This bill charts a new course for Connecticut's early care and education system. Thank you for your consideration of this bill.

Sincerely,

Mary Cecchinato

Executive Director

Torrington Child Care Center Inc.