



Connecticut
Early Childhood
Alliance

Testimony on SB 176
AN ACT CONCERNING THE SMART START PROGRAM
Education Committee February 24, 2016

Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, and distinguished members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Merrill Gay and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance a statewide membership organization committed to ensuring that all children in Connecticut are healthy, safe and ready for lifelong success.

The Early Childhood Alliance supports part of this bill but not all of it. The bill does two things:

- On line 79 it adds the requirement that a school district implementing a Smart Start classroom allocate preschool spaces in accordance with the plan they submitted with their grant proposal. **We support that.**
- Beginning on line 51 it does 2 things, it requires towns utilizing the Smart Start program to adhere to their submitted Smart Start plans. **The Alliance supports this.** It also changes the priorities used to decide which school districts will get Smart Start grants by lowering the percentage of poor children to be served in order to receive priority. Specifically it changes the target from making sure that 60% of children served are poor down to 50%. **The Alliance opposes this provision.** In this tight budget time when there are no new school readiness slots, passing a law to allow wealthier kids take the spot of poorer children is unfair.

There is also a deeper issue. In a perfect world, every three and four year old would be able to attend preschool for free at either a public school where they would go on to kindergarten, or at an early childhood program in the community that could easily provide care for the longer day while their parents were at work as well as care for their younger siblings.

Unfortunately, we don't live in anything close to a perfect world. As we try to get to that better place, it is critically important that we don't unintentionally screw up the early childhood programs that already exist. This concept of a mixed delivery system in both public schools and community providers is important, because most parents don't work just the 180 school days of

the year and many parents have shared the frustration my family had trying to find infant/toddler care. I mention infant/toddler care because state licensing regulations say that when caring for children under two years old there may be no more than four children for every adult. This makes infant/toddler care extremely expensive care to provide. Virtually every childcare center uses revenue from its preschool to subsidize the infant/toddler care. Without the preschoolers, there is no infant toddler care.

We need to be very careful as we work towards the goal of universal preschool that we don't break the existing child care system. Recently I spoke with an administrator in a school district that has requested and received tentative approval for 60 Smart Start slots. In that same community the school readiness preschools have struggled to fill their preschool slots. Those school readiness providers, some of whom are full service childcare centers providing infant toddler care as well as before and after care, are scared to death that the new Smart Start classrooms will pull away many of their preschoolers leaving them in the untenable position of not being able to make ends meet.

The requirement that OIC give priority to Smart Start applications that aimed serve more poor children was part of an effort to try and get School Districts when crafting their Smart Start applications to focus on the children who are not going to preschool now rather than try to become the sole provider of preschool in their town. We think that is a very important goal and that the priority threshold should not be lowered from 60% to 50%.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak, and I am happy to answer questions.