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STATE OF CONNECTICUT

OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD



Connecticut Office of
Early Childhood

David Wilkinson
Commissioner

**Testimony of David Wilkinson, Commissioner
Office of Early Childhood
Before the Education Committee
Re: HB 5450 – An Act Concerning the Staff Qualifications
Requirement for Early Childhood Education
Wednesday, March 14, 2018**

Good morning Senator Slossberg, Senator Boucher, Representative Fleischmann, Representative Lavielle and distinguished members of the Education Committee. I am David Wilkinson, Commissioner of the Office of Early Childhood. I am here today to testify on HB 5450 – An Act Concerning the Staff Qualifications Requirement for Early Childhood Education.

The Connecticut Office of Early Childhood advances a family-centered and results-driven approach to support young children and their families. One of our largest areas of focus is the delivery of early care and education (ECE) services to children, birth to age five. We fund early care and education through five different funding streams: School Readiness, Child Day Care, State funded Head Start, Smart Start and Preschool Development Grant program.

HB 5450 makes changes to the requirements for teachers to obtain the degrees necessary to be eligible to be the Qualified Staff Member (QSM) overseeing an ECE classroom.

The purpose of the original law was to provide a better learning environment for young children while simultaneously professionalizing a workforce that has an incredibly important job and role in shaping the future of our state. The science is indisputable: there is no more important moment in brain development and learning than the earliest years of life. Yet, in Connecticut and nationwide, the teachers who are trusted with our fastest learners – who help develop young minds at the moment that lessons will have the greatest and most lasting impact – are compensated less than any other teachers. They are also least likely to be well-credentialed.

National trends regarding the credential requirements of the ECE workforce increasingly require a bachelor's degree. At the same time, we understand the significant challenges teachers face in obtaining a degree, often while working full-time. It can be difficult to afford the cost of tuition given current inadequate wages, and when they do obtain the degree, there is rarely an accompanying wage increase. The struggle for programs as businesses is also noted as a complication, given flat rates as well as some families' inability to afford even the reduced fee scale cost. Furthermore, we understand that the inability to provide adequate wages to higher credentialed staff can lead to greater turnover thus inconsistency of care.

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Creating a balanced system that works for children and families as well as those who provide direct services to them has complexities that are being grappled with in Connecticut and nationwide. HB 5450 brings up one of those complicating factors whereby we know that our current market may be unable to bear the cost of bachelor-level teachers. This leaves us with some difficult conversations and decisions.

The current law has enabled genuine strides in increasing the credentialing and improving the training of our early childhood workforce. But year after year, we have been unable to reach the goal of 100% of head teachers holding bachelor degrees. Meanwhile, the hope that better credentials would drive appropriate compensation has not materialized.

The OEC recently completed extensive and in-depth process of gathering provider feedback. The teacher staff qualification was among the most discussed topics. Providers broadly support the notion of a bachelor's degree requirement, but feel that the largely "unfunded mandate" that is our current policy sets them up for failure. Our policy approach to date has not worked. After multiple legislative delays intended to prevent widespread non-compliance with the bachelor's degree requirement, we believe it is time to re-examine our goal and our method of achieving it. This should include:

- an analysis and affirmation of the policy objectives and evidentiary basis behind our credential requirements;
- an assessment of whether and to what degree they are realistically achievable – including examination of market rates and of best practices in other states;
- and, assuming evidence and practicality support maintaining the requirement, a reassessment of our current method of implementation with an objective of making adjustments that increase likelihood of attaining goals while reducing provider burden.

OEC has already made public its intent to reassess our method of achieving the goal it in a public process. We stand ready to work with the Committee on this important analysis. We seek to support our teachers as they strive to increase their skills and effectiveness, our state-funded programs in advancing financial stability, and the field as a whole to be recognized for the tremendous and irreplaceable value it brings to the state.

Thank you the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer your questions now and/or at a later date, as well as continue to work together to better serve our families with young children.