Testimony of Nancy Trout, MD, MPH of Connecticut Children’s Medical Center to the Education Committee Regarding HB 7250, An Act Concerning the Improvement of Child Development Through Play

March 6, 2019

Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, members of the Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts about HB 7250, An Act Concerning the Improvement of Child Development Through Play.

My name is Dr. Nancy Trout and I am co-director of the Kohl’s Start Childhood Off Right anti-obesity initiative at Connecticut Children’s Medical Center. I am submitting this testimony in support of this proposed legislation because the physical and social benefits of play during school time are invaluable in the development of healthy children.

Before commenting on the bill, I want to provide some background about Connecticut Children’s. We are a nationally recognized, 187-bed not-for-profit children’s hospital driving innovation in pediatrics. With over 2,600 employees and over 1,100 on our medical staff, we are the only hospital in the State dedicated exclusively to the care of children. Through our partnerships with adult hospitals and primary care providers across Connecticut, we are able to offer a continuum of care for children, from primary prevention to complex disease management, closer to their home. Last year alone, Connecticut Children’s directly cared for more than 15% of all kids in Connecticut covered by Medicaid and spent over $90 million in free and uncompensated care. We are also the primary pediatric teaching hospital for the University of Connecticut School of Medicine and the Frank H. Netter MD School of Medicine at Quinnipiac University and the primary pediatric research partner of Jackson Laboratories.

Coupled with breastfeeding promotion and the healthy introduction of complementary foods and beverages, movement and play for young children are essential for optimal growth. Toddlers older than 1 year should have at least 60 minutes of unstructured play in a safe environment. And the World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control both advocate for at least 60 minutes of daily physical activity for children and adolescents aged 5-17. Developing foundational motor skills and establishing an active lifestyle are an essential component in preventing children from becoming overweight or obese.

However, the benefits of play go far beyond healthy growth. Recently, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued a clinical report about the role of play in enhancing development in young children. Play with parents and peers has been shown not only to build safe, stable and nurturing relationships with caregivers, but it also enhances brain development and promotes...
social-emotional, cognitive, language, and self-regulation skills. The AAP report emphasizes the importance of playful learning and encourages advocacy for the promotion and protection of children’s unstructured play time at school that this bill supports.

Recent research has reinforced the critical importance of play in building not only essential social skills, but executive functioning skills as well. In the recent societal trajectory toward academic readiness, pre-schools and elementary schools have veered away from unstructured playful learning and toward more structured pre-literacy and pre-math activities. This academic focus not only eliminates the opportunity for children to burn calories while running and playing, it also prevents them from building fundamental social skills such as problem solving, negotiation, collaboration, and creativity. Recess and outdoor play also provides an opportunity for children of diverse backgrounds to interact and develop friendships, and they need to remain an integral part of a child’s school day.

Parents, caregivers, and teachers all have an essential role to play in promoting active and free play for young children. The benefits go beyond encouraging physical activity and preventing obesity and its associated co-morbidities. Play exercises both the body and the mind of a child.

Thank you for your consideration of our position. If you have any questions about this testimony, please contact Jane Baird, Connecticut Children’s Senior Director of External Relations, at 860-837-5557.