Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of SB 931. 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.

This bill would do 3 things.

- It would increase the rate that Care4Kids pays childcare providers to the federally recommended 75th percentile of the market as determined by a market study.
- It would increase the amount paid to School Readiness and Child Development Centers by $1000 per child in a full day full time slot, and
- It would require that the additional funds paid to School Readiness and CDC’s be used to increase pay for classroom staff.

The federal government recommends that state child care subsidy programs (Care4Kids) pay providers at the 75th percentile of the market so that parents can access three quarters of the care available. The rate that Care4Kids is paying centers here in greater Hartford is at the 7th percentile for preschool and the 4th percentile for infants and toddlers.

The reason the those payment rates are so low is that center based child care providers have received just one 3% increase since 2002. In those 17 years, the minimum wage has gone up from $6.40 to $10.10, a 57% increase. So how do child care providers make up the difference? They raise their tuition. This has a big impact on the families who rely on Care4Kids so that they can work. If the center charges $330 per week for an infant and the Care4Kids voucher is worth $201, of which the parent is supposed to pay $41, the actual cost to the parent is the $41 plus the difference between $330 and $201, so the parent is actually paying $170 per week and Care4kids pays $160. For many parents, that is a false promise that we are helping them with their child care because $170 a week is just out of the realm of possibility. This pushes families to non center based care, and limits the total amount of care available.
Raising the amount we pay child care providers through the Care4Kids program will cost money. How much money? We don’t know, because we haven’t had this conversation in a very long time. The $14.3 million in additional Child Care Development Block Grant funds that we started receiving from the federal government last year has given us the opportunity finally look at this problem. After the past several years of cuts, I know that many of us have come to see fiscal notes as the kiss of death. I urge you to support this bill so that we can see the fiscal note. We are paying providers far below the national average percentile of the market and it’s time we have the conversation about what this really should cost.

The second part of this bill would raise the amount paid for full day full year slots in School Readiness and Child Development Centers by $1000 per child. This would impact:

- 7,775 School Readiness preschool slots
- 2,044 Child Development Center preschool slots
- 1,306 Child Development Center infant toddler slots
- 11,125 total full day full year slots

This would require an additional $11 million to be added to the Early Care and Education line item and it would make a huge difference in the lives of early educators across the state who do essential work for low pay. Later in the day you will hear from many of them. You will hear how they have to rely on Care4kids and HUSKY for their own children. You will hear how after working a demanding full time job they have to work a second job to pay the rent and you will hear from center directors about the staff they’ve lost to better paying jobs.

The goal in our state subsidized programs is not just to provide custodial care for low income children, but to provide high quality care that can help children get ready for school and reach their full potential. This is why from the beginning of the School Readiness program in 1997, we have required centers to be accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. This is why years ago, this legislature set the goal that every classroom have a teacher with a Bachelor’s Degree in Early Childhood Education or a related field. That goal hasn’t been met. In fact, today you are also hearing testimony on SB 932 which would push back the deadlines again because there simply aren’t enough teachers holding those degrees or students getting those degrees. The reason for that is simple. Low pay.

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When teachers can leave the field to earn several more dollars per hour working at a store, tending bar or grooming pets, they are going to do it. Students in college who are taking out student loans are going to focus on a track to become a public school teacher rather early educator in a community school readiness program because the wage differential is huge. Many early educators are earning in the high 20’s or low 30’s. A teacher in the public school system starts at $45,000 and can make double that by the time they retire.

It is time that we give early educators a raise! That can only happen if the programs they work for get paid more per child. I urge you to vote for SB 931.