Testimony Supporting  
H.B. 6686: An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Office of Early Childhood  

Education Committee  
February 22, 2023

Dear Co-Chairs McCrory and Currey, Ranking Members Berthel and McCarty, and distinguished Members of the Education Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly:

My name is Lauren Ruth, and I am testifying today on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children (CT Voices), a research-based advocacy organization working to ensure that Connecticut is a thriving and equitable state where all children achieve their full potential.

Connecticut Voices for Children is testifying in support of H.B. 6686: An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Office of Early Childhood; however, we have concerns regarding changes to School Readiness staff member reimbursement within Section 1 as well as the disclosure of records to law enforcement within Sections 9, 10, and 11. We additionally suggest policy ideas we’d like the Education Committee to consider integrating into the language of this bill to move Connecticut’s early care and education (ECE) system further toward one that offers universal access to affordable and high-quality care.

H.B. 6686 will expand the types of children School Readiness Programs can serve to include infants and toddlers, adjust Connecticut’s requirements for the qualifications of staff leading a classroom of children to be more inclusive of alternative routes to certification and learning through experience, and make the application process for Priority School District grants less onerous. The bill also extends the Smart Start program in perpetuity, and it changes eligibility guidelines to ensure that all programs carve out at least 60 percent of spaces for families earning less than 75 percent of the State Median Income (SMI). We applaud these recommendations because they work to make high-quality early care and education opportunities newly available for low-income families with infants and toddlers, and they reduce burdens placed on early childhood educators and program administrators.

School Readiness and Smart Start programs are both critical sources of early care and education for families living in low-income communities, including families from immigrant communities. Because the eligibility requirements for these programs are income-based and not nativity-based, these programs help diverse families ensure that their children receive a high-quality education while parents work and develop appropriate pre-reading and pre-writing skills before kindergarten. These programs struggled amidst the pandemic. Programmatic reductions likely reflect increasing costs to administer programs—including equipment costs, rising inflation, administration costs, and costs due to closures—as well as stressors due to a shrinking early care and education workforce. The changes proposed within this bill aim to reduce administrative burden and increase funding predictability by decreasing the frequency of applying for grants. The changes also serve to expand the pool of high-quality early childhood educators who can lead classrooms in School Readiness programs by including early childhood educators who have achieved certification through alternative routes as well as early childhood educators who have verified employment in a state-funded child care program and 12 credits of ECE-related higher education credits.
We have concerns regarding this bill removing the requirement that School Readiness Programs use increased funding to ensure higher reimbursement for program staff. We have further concerns regarding changes to investigations of complaints regarding child care centers, group homes, and family child care homes.

The bill will remove language within the statutes that the portion of School Readiness grants above per-child costs of $8927 must be used to increase staff salaries. We understand that child care programs are experiencing numerous stressors impacting their ability to stay open; we respect that removing this language may provide programs with more flexibility to use funds toward other necessities and emergencies. However, low educator salaries are a primary driver of the ECE workforce crisis. Even if the Connecticut General Assembly passes a budget that includes the Governor’s proposed School Readiness per-child contract rates to $10,500, this amount is still more than 20 percent below Connecticut’s average cost of center-based preschool, which is $13,250 for children attending school for 50 weeks. In a year of record-breaking inflation, programs may need to use much of this increased funding to cover rent, food, and supply costs, leaving less of it for raising staff wages. We encourage the Connecticut General Assembly to work with the Office of Early Childhood to ensure that School Readiness programs can afford their programmatic costs and increase staff salaries.

We are also concerned regarding the language in the bill that would allow law enforcement officers to request unredacted copies of all records shared with OEC as part of an investigation into health concerns or licensing concerns. In 2022, CT Voices interviewed parents and early care providers who are part of immigrant communities regarding barriers to finding child care and barriers to opening child care businesses. Parents discussed concerns regarding the safety of their information about immigration status and fears of deportation as a barrier to accessing state-funded child care, and providers discussed confusing requirements and red tape to achieve licensing as barriers to opening small businesses. While Connecticut offers some protection to these families through the Trust Act, we have concerns that without further education regarding exactly what information could be shared with law enforcement and what the possible ramifications of law enforcement having this information are, members of the ECE workforce and individuals interested in opening early care businesses who are members of immigrant communities may experience a chilling effect, which could further shrink Connecticut’s ECE workforce.

JUST FACTS ON DECREASING CHILD CARE AVAILABILITY AND WORKFORCE

- **The number of children served by School Readiness programs shrunk by 30 percent between 2020 and 2021.** According to data provided by United Way of Connecticut 2-1-1 Child Care and cited within CT Voices’ annual State of Early Childhood Report, School Readiness programs served 11,913 children in 2020 and only 8,405 children in 2021.
- **Smart Start served seven percent fewer children between 2020 and 2021.** Smart Start served 665 children in 2020 and 621 in 2021.
- **Connecticut’s ECE workforce was 22 percent smaller in 2021 than in 2019.** According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, Connecticut’s early care and education workforce in May of 2019 comprised 16,270 workers. In May of 2021, only 12,640 people were part of the ECE workforce.
- **Connecticut’s number of child care workers—typically working in center-based and home-based care settings—has been cut in half between 2018 and 2022.** The occupation that has suffered the most attrition within the early care and education workforce is child care workers. The number of child care workers decreased from a high of 9,490 in May of 2018 to a low of 4,810 in the first quarter of 2022.
- **Connecticut’s wages for workers in the ECE field are untenably low.** According to the CT Department of Labor Occupational and Wage Statistic Database, the median salary for a preschool
teacher in CT in Q1 of 2022 was $31,567 compared to the median salary for a primary school teacher in CT in Q1 of 2022, which was $81,968. This disparity is even more significant for ECE workers in home-based settings, many of whom earn far less than minimum wage once the totality of their hours and expenses are considered.

In addition to considering the policies discussed directly within the text of H.B. 6686, we respectfully request the members of this committee to consider four broad policy recommendations that we believe will help move Connecticut toward the system of universal access to high-quality ECE needed to support Connecticut’s workforce of today and prepare Connecticut’s workforce of tomorrow. To achieve this, Connecticut needs to implement a constellation of policies that prioritize the quality of care to ensure that children are safe and prepared for school, reduce the cost of care for parents and expand access to care during hours and in locations that work for parents’ needs, and substantially raise wages and benefits for the child care workforce.

First, we advocate that the State should ensure that there is wage parity between ECE staff and elementary school staff. A study conducted by the University of Connecticut in partnership with the Office of Early Childhood estimated that such a policy would almost double the salaries of mid-level teachers at child care centers. Family child care (FCC) providers typically work close to 70 hours in a week, so if the State ensures wage parity that provides an equivalent amount per hour and equivalent benefits to those in child care centers, an FCC provider with an associate’s degree would more than triple their annual salary.

Second, we urge policymakers to increase reimbursement rates for publicly-funded care to 90 percent of the market rate. The federal government requires that OEC conduct market rate studies of what providers in each region of Connecticut charge. If we set child care reimbursement rates at a 90 percent level, parents with Care 4 Kids vouchers could use these vouchers to access child care at 90 percent of the programs in their area. Currently, across the state, Care 4 Kids reimburses for less than 50 percent of the market rate for infants and toddlers, less than 25 percent of the market rate for preschoolers, and less than 50 percent of the market rate for school-age children receiving part-time care. In certain parts of the state, though, Care 4 Kids reimburses for less than 10 percent of the market rate. And as I discussed earlier, per pupil reimbursement rates in many state-funded child care programs, such as School Readiness, fall short of the average cost of care in a center setting. Raising reimbursement rates for public programs like Care 4 Kids would incentivize more providers to accept low-income children into their programs, increase parental access, and increase the pay for providers.

Third, contrary to the Governor’s recommendations in the FY 24 and 25 budget, we believe Connecticut should expand Care 4 Kids eligibility for parents earning up to 85 percent of the state median income and expand eligibility for all federally allowable categories of people. Currently, CT expands and contracts who can apply for Care 4 Kids based on how much money the State receives from the federal government. In the past, this has led to closed waitlists, families losing eligibility, and severe reductions in families served due to confusion about eligibility. It’s also created a pocket of low- and medium-income families who earn slightly too much to qualify for Care 4 Kids but can’t afford the full cost of care. Without thoughtful efforts to smooth potential benefit cliffs, this pocket of people may be further enlarged when families receive tax credits that help reduce child poverty but are not large enough to cover the staggering cost of child care. Therefore, we recommend that Connecticut policymakers commit to ensuring that all families who the federal government says may receive money through this program do, even when this requires committing more money to Care 4 Kids than what is required for the federal match.

And fourth, we echo the recommendations of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that families in Connecticut should not spend more than seven percent of their income on child care. Realizing this recommendation would require a significant investment in the early care and education infrastructure. Currently, even families receiving Care 4 Kids pay up to 10 percent of their income in child care co-pays. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that child care price comprises between 14 percent
and 18 percent of median family income in CT, depending upon where families live.\textsuperscript{13}

Connecticut Voices for Children urges the committee to pass H.B. 6686: An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Office of Early Childhood and to consider our suggestions to strengthen this bill and Connecticut’s early childhood education system.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Lauren Ruth, Ph.D.
Research & Policy Fellow
Connecticut Voices for Children

\textsuperscript{2} Connecticut Voices for Children calculations utilizing data updated on January 3, 2022 from: https://resources.211childcare.org/reports/average-child-care-cost/
\textsuperscript{5} Connecticut Voices for Children calculations utilizing data retrieved from: https://www.bls.gov/oes/tables.htm
\textsuperscript{6} Data for Q1 2022 retrieved from: https://www1.ctdol.state.ct.us/lmi/wages/default.asp
\textsuperscript{7} Data for Q1 2022 retrieved from: https://www1.ctdol.state.ct.us/lmi/wages/default.asp
\textsuperscript{12} Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Program, 45 CFR Part 98 (2016).