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Testimony in Support of

H.B. 5002: An Act Concerning School Resources and S.B. 448: An Act Concerning a Working Group to Examine Existing Tax Expenditures in the State

Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee
March 28, 2024

Dear Co-Chairs Fonfara and Horn, Ranking Members Martin and Cheeseman, and distinguished members of the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee:

My name is Emily Byrne, and I am submitting testimony on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children (CT Voices), a research and advocacy organization working to ensure that Connecticut is a thriving and equitable state where all children reach their full potential.

CT Voices supports H.B. 5002: An Act Concerning Early Childhood Care and Education and offers some additional suggestions that we believe will strengthen the language of this important bill**. CT Voices also supports S.B. 448: An Act Concerning a Working Group to Examine Existing Tax Expenditures in the State.**

CT Voices supports H.S. 5002: An Act Concerning Early Childhood Care and Education.

Sections 1 and 2 of H.B. 5002 seek to retool the existing Early Childhood Education Fund in a way that will allow for maximization as well as creates an advisory commission that will oversee the fund. Sections 3 and 4 outline the manner in which the Connecticut State Bond Commission may allocate dollars into the fund and instructs the transfer of $50 million into the Early Childhood Care and Education Fund not later than June 30, 2025. Section 5 allows the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood (OEC) to establish a Tri-Share Child Care Match Program pilot (for a minimum of two years) to serve New London County. Section 6 establishes a grants program for the purposes of supplementing educator and provider wages or "to address any other programmatic or administrative needs" for those operations servicing high-need populations determined by the OEC Commissioner and taking into account the findings of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care.

CT Voices, over the years, has published an annual State of Early Childhood report that speaks to various components of the early care and education (ECE) sector. Since the pandemic, our reports have formed an arc that showcase the exceptionally high cost for parents and caretakers, low wages within the ECE sector and the slim margins providers operate at as well as the ultimate price paid by our state's children who are unable to access high-quality ECE. Our 2023 State of Early Childhood report uplifts the work led by Governor Ned Lamont and Commissioner Beth Bye vis-à-vis the Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care. They understand, like we do, that early care is essential infrastructure and the Blue Ribbon Panel's report, released late last year, speaks to the transformational change needed.

Connecticut policymakers recognize that Connecticut's ECE system is at a dramatic inflection point. Parents can't afford quality care and often lack proximal access to it, educator wages are undignified and providers can't hire fast enough, and the federal dollars and state contributions are woefully insufficient. The understanding that the early care market is broken is so widespread that U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen is saying as such. We commend the Committee's efforts to address these challenges by tackling some of the root problems within the ECE sector through H.B. 5002.

Sections 1 and 2. We supported the effort to establish an Early Childhood Education Fund last session and are equally supportive of the Legislature's effort to retool the fund this session. In fact, we suggested something similar in our 2023 State of Early Childhood report.[1] This is a smart way to leverage surplus funds while still adhering to the spirit of the state's fiscal controls. This is also a way for philanthropy to support systems change efforts in a way that maximizes their strengths. Most importantly, this is a show of courage from the Legislature to not only state in its passage that child care is infrastructure and should be funded as such, this will show the country that the State is taking bold steps to make Connecticut the most family friendly.

The creation of an Early Childhood Care and Education Fund Advisory Commission ensures the funds are used precisely for the purpose established. One such task is the submission of a ten-year plan not later than January 1, 2026. This is best practice and allows the public to see the aim and steps that will be taken to reach our collective goals. The bill states that the Advisory Commission will update the plan at least annually and hold a public hearing annually. While the idea of holding an annual public hearing to allow for comments on any actions the Commission may take in any given year makes good sense, updating a ten-year plan every year makes less sense. Annual adjustments to a ten-year plan allow for a moving target whereas annual steps that vary from year to year to reach a ten-year target are best practice. We respectfully ask the Committee to look at the language on page 7 to ensure the right intent.

This fund is similar to New Mexico's Early Childhood Trust Fund that was created in 2020 and has become a shining example of a state investing in early care and education as essential infrastructure. Resourced by overflows from their federal mineral leasing payments and oil and gas severance tax, the fund is projected to hold over $9 billion in 2028 and that year's state distribution for ECE beyond federal grants is slated to be over $440 million. Given the thoughtful blueprint developed by the OEC vis-à-vis the Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel on Early Care, imagine the possibilities if ECE in Connecticut was resourced appropriately.

Section 3 and 4. We support the proceeds of the sale of bonds to be used by the OEC for the purposes of early care and education needs as well as a general fund investment of $50 million into the Early Childhood Care and Education Fund by June 30, 2025. While we understand there may be fiscal limitations, we respectfully urge the Legislature for a greater investment that's following a more urgent timeline. Beyond the immediate need in Connecticut, it's important to note that New Mexico's Early Childhood Trust Fund began with a $300 million seed investment through a general fund appropriation. Today, New Mexico's trust fund is now exceptionally well endowed with billions of dollars; however, it's important to note that the initial $300 million investment is what allowed their Legislature to contribute more to early care and education in the early years of the endowment's existence than it otherwise would have been able to.

We know that one of the ways to support parents in the workforce as well as give children the foundational learning they need to succeed as future workers is having an early care and education system that is high-quality, affordable, and accessible to all families. However, many parents in the United States do not have access to stable, affordable, high-quality child care.[2] [3] A 2023 national study found that around three-quarters of surveyed parents with children ages zero to three reported that access to child care poses a challenge, and over half said that finding affordable or high-quality child care was a significant challenge.[4] Unfortunately, Connecticut (reviewing data from 2017-2021) had the nation's third most expensive child care for infants and toddlers, just behind Washington D.C. and Massachusetts.[5]

The 2023 Annie E. Casey Kids Count Data Book reported average costs of $18,156 per year for center-based care and $11,955 per year for care in a family child care home (FCC). [6] Even with Care 4 Kids support, family fees are a heavy burden on many Connecticut families. For example, a family of four at 60 percent of the State Median Income (SMI) generates $79,910 before taxes,[7] and must pay ten percent of their gross income in family fees, which is $7,991. This amount is more than a family's gross monthly income at this threshold.[8] Moreover, there are long waiting lists for processing Care 4 Kids applications, significant shortages in child care slots, and uneven geographic availability, leaving some parents on child care waiting lists for months, if not years, to obtain high-quality child care.[9] As a result, a parent, usually the mother, remains at home with the child, limiting her ability to participate in the economy. This dynamic reduces the family's ability to achieve economic security, creates gender-based differences in poverty rates, and limits the growth of Connecticut's labor force.

Early care and education, as an industry, contributes substantial economic output.[10] The ECE industry generates economic output directly through the consumption of goods and services needed to operate programs, indirectly through generating output in other industries when providers purchase goods and services, and through the induced effect of ECE workers spending their earnings throughout the economy.[11] In 2016, Connecticut's ECE industry brought in $718 million in total industry revenue.[12] Only 20.5 percent of the total industry revenue in Connecticut's ECE industry in 2016 ($147,010,627) came from money paid by federal and state child care assistance programs, and the rest came from families' economic activity. If we adjust this estimate to 2023 dollars, this would be equivalent to Connecticut's ECE industry generating an estimated $921 million in total industry revenue over a year.[13]

In addition to the industry-level economic output ECE generates, early care and education also contributes to national and state economies by allowing more parents to work. State-level estimates suggest that each dollar the government provides to support ECE (through a combination of subsidy programs and tax credits) creates $3.80 in greater economic output; this greater economic output includes the combination of the ECE industry-level economic output and increased parental employment and spending.[14] If we apply this multiplier to the amount of money paid by Connecticut's federal and state child care assistance programs in 2016, government spending on child care assistance programs created an estimated $558 million in greater economic output. If we adjust this estimate to 2023 dollars, this would be equivalent to Connecticut's ECE industry creating an estimated $716 million in greater economic output that includes the combination of ECE industry-level economic output and increased parental employment and spending.[15] Ultimately, government spending on Connecticut's ECE system is a wise investment because these dollars produce substantially more value for the economy than the initial investment.

While the business and economic proposition is important to uplift, the real return is in our state's children. The period of birth to three is the foundation of a child's future long-term success in terms of educational attainment, ability to get and maintain employment, physical and mental health, and the foundation for strong social relationships as adults.[16] High-quality infant and toddler care has been shown to boost memory and language skills, resulting in better academic performance and social relationships in kindergarten.[17] Gains from preschool include school readiness skills, social-emotional and behavioral development, improved motor skills, problem-solving, language skills, pre-math skills, and self-regulation skills.[18] Children who have experienced high-quality preschool tend to be more confident and have improved focus.

Providing high-quality ECE is a great short-term and it's also a great long-term investment in our state's children. Children are more likely to develop the necessary skills to life-long success in high-quality child care environments and in homes with reduced parental stress,[19] which high-quality child care environments support. For children ages birth to five, high-quality child care reduces disparities and closes achievement gaps in learning, particularly among children from low-income families,[20] immigrant families,[21] children of color,[22] children who are homeless,[23] and children with special needs.[24] These findings are particularly significant because these children have the least access to high-quality care.[25] This is due to multiple reasons, including (but not limited to) inability to afford child care, lack of familiar cultural and linguistic responsive care, and lack of appropriately trained professionals to support children with trauma-related behaviors and children with special health needs.

Section 5. The Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care suggested implementing a Tri-Share public-private cost share model in Eastern Connecticut in SFY 2026. This is a model that was based on the tri-share programs in Michigan and North Carolina, which can help reduce the cost of care for families. [26] This recognition is so widely appreciated that even the federal government has linked CHIPS and Science Act funding to child care.[27] To be clear, the language in H.B. 5002 does not directly tie a worker with their workplace, which researchers at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research warns against.[28] However, while this pilot seeks to uplift the child care sector through the contributions of the business sector, we hope this pilot remains a pilot due to the limitations with employer-sponsored child care benefits.

There are varying points of view when it comes to employer-sponsored child care; however, we agree with early care and education expert Elliot Haspel that if the sole goal is to place children safely so that parents can work, this creates a "minimum viable child care fallacy."[29] As a reminder, what we want is three-fold: 1) we want children to have the right educational building blocks that will set them up for lifelong success, 2) we want early childhood educators to be recognized as the professionals they are and to be paid dignified wages, and 3) we want to affordability for parents and gender parity in the workforce—all of these things support business industry and our economy. These goals require us to develop a high-quality system of choice with well-compensated educators and built-in affordability for parents.

For these reasons, we appreciate the inclusion of pilot language for a tri-share program in Connecticut. We particularly like the aspect of this pilot being directed to parents whose incomes fall above the threshold for qualifying for Care 4 Kids but below the ability to live with financial security in Connecticut. Creating a sister fund to support affordability for families that aren't able to access federal funds (e.g. undocumented parents and parents earning over 85 percent of the SMI) is a recommendation we provided in our 2023 State of Early Childhood report, which was a response to the Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care. However, assuming this is in fact the intent, line 248 will need to be edited to ensure this particular family constellation is taken into account. This can be done by replacing "as calculated in the most recent annual report" with "as calculated using the most recent Household Budget Calculator." Additionally, line 250 of the bill language will need to be edited to specify state public assistance; specifically, "(v) not be receiving other state public assistance for child care costs." However, assuming the language edits above are the correct intent, we would also want to ensure that when changing this language, "state public assistance" isn't inclusive of the Earned Income Tax Credit or any other tax credit that might later be enacted.

Our interpretation of this bill is that this is a small number of children and families if any—indeed, it may very well be that the early childhood educators and providers themselves will be the individuals needing Care 4 Kids assistance—and incentives that increase providers are worthwhile, especially in a "child care desert," which New London County and the eastern part of Connecticut are considered. Ultimately, there is tremendous potential to leverage this as an opportunity for great innovation and entrepreneurship. To help in this effort, we strongly encourage partnering child care providers with businesses that may be able to extend benefits to providers in exchange for ensuring a certain number of employees receive slots, as well as creating child care job sharing programs so that stay-at-home parents can earn some extra money providing child care for a few hours at a time.[30]

Section 6. We support efforts that move the state closer to wage parity between early care and education and K-12 educators. The early care and education workforce is among the lowest-paid professions in our state and the impact falls largely on women, particularly those of color, as many child care providers and child care staff are of these demographics. While we recognize that K-12 educators are not paid enough, our research at CT Voices shows that early childhood educators currently earn far less. Too many early childhood educators and providers suffer from chronic business insecurity and earn razor-thin profit margins, and as such, many child care businesses close, and especially so these past few years. Much of this can be attributed to child care subsidies not covering the true cost of care. The Care 4 Kids subsidy typically reimburses between 34 to 58 percent of the market rate,[31] which itself does not cover the actual cost of care.

Family child care (FCC) educators operating from their homes are too often paid below minimum wage based on their rates and the number of hours they work, and child care center (CCC) providers more often than not have narrow operating margins. Suppose an owner-provider of a FCC home waived family fees and private tuition, taking only government subsidies. In that case, a baseline quality model shows that their hourly wage would amount to $8.14, which is less than the minimum wage of $15.69 and less than what they would pay an assistant.[32] If a CCC were only to receive Care 4 Kids vouchers as payment, the provider would not be able to cover a year's worth of expenses. Our model of a small CCC serving 26 children at baseline quality shows that a CCC would need an additional $109,888 over and above Care 4 Kids vouchers to break even. Even at the lowest level of quality, child care providers can only remain open by charging families Care 4 Kids family co-pay fees and/or reserving some spaces for families that can pay private tuition.[33]

Connecticut Voices for Children has prioritized early care and education as an issue area since our founding in 1995. We know, because the research and data tell us, that high-quality early care and education is essential to a child's future well-being, advances full parental employment and family economic security, as well as supports businesses and our economy overall. H.B. 5002, if enacted, will signal to the country that Connecticut is serious about taking the necessary steps that encourage families to root and grow here and provide a model for how to do so. We applaud the Legislature for considering this matter and urge the committee to support **H.B. 5002: An Act Concerning Early Childhood Care and Education.**

CT Voices supports S.B. 448: An Act Concerning a Working Group to Examine Existing Tax Expenditures in the State.

S.B. 448 establishes a working group to "examine existing tax expenditures… in the state for the purpose of simplifying the state tax code and to identify expenditures that are redundant, obsolete, duplicative or inconsistent in language or policy." The working group is tasked with submitting a report to the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee by January 1, 2025 on its findings. While the working group is slated to terminate upon report submission, we offer that it may be useful for the Legislature in its policymaking to update the report on a regular basis and, perhaps, this will be included among the report's recommendations.

Connecticut Voices for Children has also prioritized tax reform as an issue area since our founding in 1995. We have recently elevated the need for more transparency around our state's high cost, high growth tax expenditures because we believe a thorough examination is important and best practice. Moreover, we have renewed the suggestion that some tax expenditures could be eliminated or reduced to help create a fairer tax system and fund tax credits that are proven to eradicate child poverty and advance family economic security, like a fully refundable state-level child tax credit.[34] One of the policy recommendations from our latest report specifically calls for a distributional analysis of tax expenditures, which has been done by the State of Texas, the Congressional Budget Office, and the Joint Committee on Taxation.[35] We are grateful to the Legislature for considering this matter and urge the committee to support **S.B. 448: An Act Concerning a Working Group to Examine Existing Tax Expenditures in the State.**

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

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Connecticut Voices for Children

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JUST FACTS[36]

- If only receiving Care 4 Kids vouchers as payment, Family Child Care (FCC) providers earn below minimum wage. Care 4 Kids reimbursement typically reimburses between 34 to 58 percent of the market rate,4 which itself does not cover the actual cost of care. If an owner provider of a family day care home were to waive family fees and private tuition, taking only government subsidies, a baseline quality model shows that their hourly wage would amount to $8.14.

- If only receiving Care 4 Kids vouchers as payment, child care centers (CCCs) could not cover a year of expenses. Our model of a small CCC serving 26 children at baseline quality shows that a CCC would need an additional $109,888 over and above Care 4 Kids vouchers to break even. Even at the lowest level of quality, child care providers can only remain open by charging families Care 4 Kids family co-pay fees and/or reserving some spaces for families that can pay private tuition.

- Even with Care 4 Kids support, family fees are a heavy burden on many Connecticut families. For example, a family of four at 60 percent of SMI generates $79,910 before taxes,5 and must pay ten percent of their gross income in family fees, which is $7,991.

- The number of State-funded infant/toddler slots decreased by 17 percent. The total number of infant/toddler slots dropped from 21,109 in 2022 to 17,619 in 2023—a reduction of 3,490 seats.

- The number of State-funded preschool slots decreased by four percent. The total number of preschool slots dropped from 51,983 in 2022 to 49,898 in 2023—a reduction of 2,085 seats.

- The decrease in State-funded preschool slots continues a new trend that began amidst the pandemic. From 2020 to 2023, Connecticut experienced a reduction of 14,891 preschool slots from 64,789 to 49,898, a 23 percent reduction since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lowest number of State-funded preschool slots reported since CT Voices began tracking these data.

- The number of licensed FCCs continued its two-decade downward trend with a five percent reduction this past year. The total number of licensed FCCs dropped from 1,908 in 2022 to 1,817 in 2023—a reduction of 91 providers. There has been a total reduction of 1,614 licensed FCCs from 2002 to 2023, an all-time low (47 percent reduction).

- The number of licensed CCCs has started rebounding from its pandemic-induced decline. The total number of licensed CCCs increased from 1,222 in 2022 to 1,374 in 2023— an increase of 152 centers or 12 percent. However, the number of CCCs has not yet fully rebounded to pre-pandemic levels of 1,411 centers.

- Pandemic-related efforts to increase support to families have helped to increase the number of children enrolled in Care 4 Kids. The number of infants and toddlers enrolled in Care 4 Kids increased from 6,992 in January of 2022 to 8,206 in January of 2023 (an increase of 1,214 children/17 percent). The number of preschoolers enrolled in Care 4 Kids increased from 7,031 in January of 2022 to 7,438 in January of 2023 (an increase of 407 children/six percent).

- More children are enrolled in Head Start and School Readiness programs. From 2021 to 2022, the number of preschoolers enrolled in Head Start programs increased from 4,026 to 8,252, an increase of 4,226 children. From 2021 to 2022, the number of preschoolers enrolled in School Readiness programs increased from 8,405 to 12,008, an increase of 3,603 children. The number of infants and toddlers enrolled in Early Head Start decreased slightly from 2021 (1,896 enrolled) to 2022 (1,674 enrolled) but still represents an increase from 2020 (1,586 enrolled).

- The number and percentage of infants and toddlers with special needs in Connecticut is steadily increasing. The number of children eligible for Birth to Three services increased from 4,726 in 2015 to 6,034 in 2021. When compared to the overall number of children ages zero through three, the eligibility increased from 4.3 percent of children ages zero through three in 2015 to 4.8 percent of children ages zero through three in 2021.

- The number and percentage of preschoolers with special needs in Connecticut is steadily increasing. The number of PreK3 students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) in Connecticut in 2012 was 441, or 25 percent of PreK3 students. The number of PreK3 students with IEPs in Connecticut in 2022 was 1,199, or 29 percent of PreK3 students. The number of PreK4 students with IEPs in Connecticut in 2012 was 4,158, or 27 percent of PreK4 students. The number of PreK4 students with IEPs in Connecticut in 2022 was 4,723, or 32 percent of PreK4 students.

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