

Achievement Gap Task Force Mtg.
January 9, 2011
Testimony of All Our Kin, Inc.

Good morning. I'm Shannon Hill, child care policy and economic development fellow at All Our Kin. Thank you for this opportunity.

Addressing the achievement gap must begin at birth with high-quality early care and education. Home-based child care providers, both licensed and unlicensed, play a crucial role as teachers of Connecticut's youngest and most vulnerable children. The majority of infants and toddlers are cared for in home-based settings, and children with socioeconomic risk factors are most likely to be in home-based child care arrangements. These child care programs are, therefore, essential to meeting the need for infant and toddler care, as well as the need for affordable, second- and third- shift, and culturally-based care.

At their best, home-based child care providers lay the foundation for our next generation of citizens to learn, develop, and succeed – both in school and in life. But family child care varies wildly in quality, from programs meeting the highest possible standards to programs that do regrettably little to support children's development.

We at All Our Kin have invested significantly and with tremendous success in supporting unlicensed caregivers to meet state standards and become licensed family child care providers, with significant effects on the health, safety, and professionalism of their programs. We also enhance the quality and sustainability of licensed family child care programs by providing intensive coaching and consultation to teachers and ongoing professional development opportunities.

However, while many other states have invested in initiatives that develop quality and raise standards for licensed family child care, our state lags far behind, with almost no government investment in home-based child care. Until Connecticut begins to invest in these programs, a substantial percentage of our low-income children will be left out of state child care quality initiatives. In order, therefore, to address the achievement gap, it is essential for Connecticut to invest in family child care, ensuring that these programs meet the highest possible levels of quality.

We in Connecticut know how to improve early care and education programs. The School Readiness program is a proven model for creating quality care. But that initiative, and the funding and technical support that accompanies it, has not been available to family child care programs, and we offer very little to encourage our family child care providers to meet quality standards above and beyond the licensing minimum.

Therefore, we propose five key initiatives that have the potential to significantly improve the quality of early care and education in home-based programs:

1. Maintain child care subsidies through Care 4 Kids, increase subsidy rates to support quality care, and change eligibility rules so that children don't lose access to care if their parents become unemployed or family circumstances change.
2. Create a Quality Rating and Improvement System that includes family child care. This system should hold programs to standards that are equivalent with those for centers but also recognize the unique nature of home-based care.
3. Open eligibility for School Readiness and infant-toddler contract funding to family child care programs demonstrating that they meet quality standards.
4. Continue the very successful Early Learning Guidelines coaching and consultation initiative, currently funded by DSS, which provides training and technical assistance around the early learning standards to family child care providers across the state.
5. Invest in staffed family child care networks. Recent research demonstrates that the best way to improve family child care quality is through creating staffed family child care networks with specially-trained coordinators and strong, relationship-based models for training and professional development.

Despite everything the state has done to enhance our educational system, we have yet to invest in these proven models for raising quality in the child care programs where so many of our most vulnerable children are cared for each day. I hope we will seize the opportunity before us now to close the achievement gap, and put all of Connecticut's children on a path to success.

Thank you.