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Achievement Gap Task Force

Testimony of Jillian Gilchrest, Early Care and Education Policy Analyst

Connecticut Association for Human Services

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The Connecticut Association for Human Services would like to thank the Task Force for the opportunity to speak at today's Forum on high-impact strategies to address Connecticut's achievement gap. My name is Jillian Gilchrest and I am the Early Care and Education Policy Analyst for CAHS.

Founded in 1910, CAHS promotes family economic security strategies that empower low-income working families to achieve financial independence. CAHS takes a deliberate role in advocacy for the development and implementation of a cohesive early care and education system. We take a lead role in building the public will for an early care system by convening the Providers' Caucus. The Caucus serves as a forum for providers-- center-based and family childcare, publicly and privately funded-- to develop a well-informed voice and become equipped to participate in early care and education policy dialogue.

CAHS is also a member of the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance. The Alliance is a statewide membership and advocacy organization committed to improving the developmental outcomes for all children, birth to 8, in the areas of early learning, health, safety and economic security.



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Connecticut policymakers, educators and the public believe that achieving school success and closing the achievement gap should be attainable by all children, regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and primary language. An indicator of school success is the percentage of Connecticut 4th graders reaching goal on the CT Mastery Test.

In 2009, almost 60 percent of Connecticut fourth graders scored below the proficient level in reading on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) test, the only standardized test in which all states participate—ranking Connecticut second best among the 50 states. While it is good news that Connecticut ranks second, a 40 percent proficiency rate is cause for deep concern.

It is also concerning that there are gaping disparities amongst racial and ethnic groups in reading proficiency. In Connecticut, 52 percent of White fourth graders scored at or above proficiency in reading, and only 22 percent of Black and 15 percent of Hispanic fourth graders did so in 2009. Connecticut tied with Iowa for 5th place and Indiana for 13th place for the percentage of Black fourth graders and Hispanic fourth graders respectively who reached proficiency.

Parents, caregivers, and teachers each have an important part to play in a child's reading development. Family income, a mother's education, and learning as a family value are pivotal influences on how and when a child is exposed to the precursors of reading— being read to before bedtime, having many books at home or from the library, and going to high quality preschool. For those children who miss out on early learning opportunities, catching



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up with their peers by third grade is a long, sometimes impassable, road. While some fourth-graders are reading to learn, others are still learning to read.

If intervention does not happen or does not take hold by third grade, grades plummet, frustration rises, and a child becomes disengaged from learning. Research shows that students who are held back or who drop out of school are often those with poor reading skills.

We must begin a system of early care and education at birth in order to effectively address Connecticut's achievement gap. Vocabulary development by age 3 has been found to predict reading achievement. By age 3, children from wealthier families have typically heard 30 million more words than children from low-income families. (*Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010*)

The foundation of children's learning begins in their home and parents are their first teachers, no one is denying that, but with roughly 76 percent of children under age five with employed parents, children are in some form of non-parental care each week, often for many hours. (Urban Institute)

CAHS proposes the following strategies to impact Connecticut's Achievement Gap:



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1. Engage Parents in Children's Academic Success -- Support the pre-literacy of Connecticut children under the age of three by providing parents with information on what they can do to begin the language learning of their youngest children.
2. Increase Access to Quality Pre-Kindergarten Experience (B-5)
 - Fully fund school readiness and state funded center programs for all in families with income less than 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, beginning with Priority and Competitive School Districts.
 - Create a consistent and dependable Care4Kids Program that both supports a family's ability to work and incentivizes quality. For instance, increase the Care4Kids rate for family childcare providers who participate in the very successful Early Learning Guidelines coaching and consultation initiative, currently funded by DSS, which supports Family Resource Centers and other community hubs in providing local training and technical assistance around the early learning standards to family child care providers across the state.
 - Coordinate CT's Early Care and Education System to increase efficiency and improve outcomes for young children.
3. Improve Workforce Development and Increase Compensation (B-8)
 - Establish literacy coaches for teachers to support pre-literacy, reading classes, and developmentally appropriate practices in all schools that serve preschool through grade four children. Literacy coaches should have a master's degree in reading instruction and extensive knowledge in the science of teaching reading.



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- Increase compensation for CT's Childcare Providers. Early childhood teachers are one of the lowest paid professions according to the CT Department of Labor. It is outrageous that Connecticut's early care and education programs in 2011 were funded at more than 10% below 2002 levels (CT Voices for Children). At the same time, in an effort to improve the skills and quality of teachers, Connecticut has enacted strict degree requirements for early childhood teachers. This is an equation that does not add up. To attract qualified teachers to the profession, wages must correspond with required skill levels or degreed teachers will seek other jobs.

Thank you for the invitation to participate in today's Forum. I appreciate your taking the time to listen to our suggestions and for the work you are doing on behalf of Connecticut's children.