

**National Conference for Community and Justice Quarterly Forum
Achieving Equitable Education for All Students:
Legal, Institutional and Activist Strategies**

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CT Voices for Children
April 30, 2004**

In January of this year, Connecticut's Lt. Governor M. Jodi Rell spoke to a group of business and higher education professionals at Fairfield University about the need to develop a statewide plan for reinvesting in our young children. She said:

“There is an old saying, “May you live in interesting times.” Some attribute the saying to an ancient Chinese curse. Others believe it originated as a Scottish blessing.

No one knows for sure, but it certainly reflects the tenor and the times in Connecticut today. Most importantly, it reflects the opportunity that we have before us... as we think together about how issues of economic development can, and must, be linked with issues about children's development.”

I too would like to talk about child development and economic development, about human capital as the linking agent between them, and about a bold new vision for Connecticut where we commit to invest early and often in the health and successful learning of our littlest citizens.

It is a simple idea – that we would attend as much to investing in our children and families as to investing in stadiums and other forms of business. And it is an idea whose time has come in Connecticut, for we have too few children to fill even the jobs we have right now.

There is, in fact, only one Connecticut child between the ages of birth and 18 for every three adults. Even if our workforce productivity continues to increase, we will need more new workers than are now “in the child and youth development pipeline.” And as Connecticut's population ages, the costs of our aging populace will take up more and more of Connecticut's discretionary resources, leaving less and less for those at the other end of the age continuum. Clearly, we cannot afford to waste the proper development of even one Connecticut child.

The reality of these numbers and the poignancy of Connecticut's recent budget decisions with regard to young children and their families becomes very real for my husband and me every weekday morning. At about 6:15 each workday our two young granddaughters – ages four and two years old -- arrive at the front door. They race into our house with lots of chatter, boundless energy, and unfettered enthusiasm for each new day. You might wonder why we do this... Sometimes, I wonder myself! Six a.m. seems earlier and earlier the older you get!

But the facts are simple. Both of their parents work – they must, to be able to afford to live in Connecticut. Both of their jobs begin before seven a.m. – and there are few if any early care and education settings that take young children at that hour. And, of course, the price is right!

There is, of course, a preciousness to these mornings that reveals why we all continue to do this work on behalf of our youngest children. Here's one example that will resonate with you:

Lisi, the four year old, had wrangled an invitation to come back to the house one afternoon and stay overnight. We did a thousand things together, all fun, and when she awoke the next morning, she came downstairs and declared that this was the “best sleepover ever.” Then she looked us deeply and slowly declared: “I need to come live with you. You are alone. You have *no* children.”

It’s interesting to reflect on that experience for it shines a light onto the incredible capacity that even our youngest children have – to assess a situation, think it over, formulate a solution, and articulate it. And she’s just four!

I am convinced that Lisi and her younger sister Elena will enter kindergarten in Connecticut fully ready for school success. She has the requisite cognitive and language skills and the necessary behavioral repertoire. She is confident and secure, and she knows a lot about her world already.

But let’s look at her environment. Both of her parents are college educated. They are married to each other, and they all live together in a safe neighborhood with similar kids and families. Her dad is a teacher and her mom is a bilingual speech therapist, so they don’t make a ton of money but they are economically secure.

She has two sets of grandparents. The Parra’s came to America from Columbia, South America. She sees them regularly and they converse in both English and Spanish, as do her parents. Of course, Herb and I are the other grandparents, and we just wish we spoke Spanish!

Lisi entered child care as an infant and was cared for by the same incredible woman in a licensed family home for her first four years. When she became four, she entered Calvin Hill, a wonder full-day early learning center in New Haven. Her every day is filled with language and laughter, structure and stretching.

Not all of Connecticut’s young children have these opportunities. Too many live in poverty. Too many lack access to health care that is preventive in nature, timely and affordable. When their parents work, too many are cared for in settings where quality is not the norm and where even such basic needs as safety are questionable. Too many will stand at the kindergarten door demonstrably behind at the age of five. Too many will then struggle academically with proficiency in reading, mathematics and writing. And far too many will be children from Connecticut’s poorest communities and from families of color.

Perhaps most damning in this sad litany is that, in the wealthiest state in the nation, this set of challenges is easily predicted by the economic status of families and can be remedied with a different set of public policies and public investments.

I will not drown you in data, but let me put just a few numbers on these statements for you.

- Each year about 43,000 babies are born in Connecticut. Babies of Hispanic origin represent the fastest growing group of these infants. They are also among the poorest.
- There are about 220,000 children in CT under the age of five. And a little more than 50% of them reside in our priority, transition or special needs school districts. These communities do not include the Avons, Simsburys, Westons, Wiltons, and Woodbridges of Connecticut. They do include the New Havens, Hartfords, Bridgeports, Windhams, East Havens, Middletowns, and even Branfords.

- About 71,000 children, ages birth to 18, are uninsured today. As many as 86,000 more may lose their HUSKY health care because of recent budget cuts.
- One in four children now enrolled in our K-12 public schools is eligible for the federal school lunch program, and about 12,000 *under the age of five* live at or below half of the federal poverty level, about \$9000 or less for a family of four. In many of these families, at least one parent – sometimes the only parent -- is in the workforce.
- In fact, the 2000 census tells us that 92% of all Connecticut children under the age of six have at least one parent in the full-time labor force, and 62% have both parents, or the only parent, working full time.
- We have a program that, under the law in Connecticut, could help support low- and middle-income parents with the cost of child care. And although it was *never* fully funded, in 2001 the state expended \$120 million to help families pay for child care. By 2005, state policy makers will have cut that program, called Care4Kids, in half. To put numbers on these foolish cuts, in September of 2002 this program was serving 23,833 children; in December of 2003, it served 14,779. And today, 10,000 families with 17,000 children are on the waiting list for child care subsidies.
- CT does have a nationally acclaimed school readiness program, initiated in 1997-98 with \$38 million. Since that first investment, however, those programs have not received even cost of living increases. Today, this program reaches about 6,000 three- and four-year olds in our most economically and educationally challenged school districts. Yet we know that 15,000 to 18,000 three- and four-year olds at risk of educational failure still await the opportunity to attend high quality, accredited and evaluated school readiness programs.
- Importantly, on a statewide basis, parents report that about three quarters of their four year olds enter kindergarten with some kind of formal preschool learning experience. But among our more economically challenged school districts and communities as many as one in two are still without a formal preschool experience at age four. And, importantly, all preschool settings are not created equal. Some have extraordinary quality; others do not.

So, what does this all have to do with economic development in the State of Connecticut? And what might be a “bold new vision” with which to guide public policy and public investment?

In January of this year, Art Rolnick, Senior Vice President of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank, came to Connecticut to talk about what his research on economic development and public investment has taught him.

For the record, Mr. Rolnick describes himself as a conservative, laissez-faire, marketplace economist – that means he is very comfortable letting the marketplace solve its own problems without public intervention. But he has recently studied outcome data from a series of high quality early childhood development programs and, as a result, he has become a real advocate for early childhood investment. Specifically, he found an annual rate of return on public investment of 16% for monies expended for high quality, comprehensive early child development programs.

When he came to Connecticut in January of this year, he asked this rhetorical question: Why would state policy makers put their public monies into stadiums and businesses, or even into the stock market, where they *might* get 3 or 4% in annual return -- when they could demonstrably get a 16% return annually by investing in the early care and early learning of youth at risk children?

Rolnick's study confirms what others have also shown. That a dollar invested in comprehensive, high quality child development programs saves between 4 and 8 dollars over the longer haul. And most of these cost savings come from the very end of the spending continuum where we get the least bang for the buck – in prison costs for our incarcerated adults. Some have even been so bold as to say we can, and should, close the prison door at the kindergarten door!

But we are not dependent upon only this robust body of literature to tell us that early childhood investments make good economic policy. Right here in Connecticut, we are beginning to see the economic benefits of our own high quality school readiness programs, where school districts are saving real money from holding fewer children back in kindergarten and first grade and from having fewer special education students at these same grade levels.

So, what the economic message here? Actually, it's pretty simple.

- First, the early years really matter. Whether you measure neurological development, early social-emotional development, language or cognition, or even the ability of young children for time on task behaviors, much of the frame for school success is built before children ever get to the kindergarten door.
- Second, parents are key players in children's early development, but they need help. Whether because of their own family experiences, because they are working, or because when babies arrive we *all* know a lot less than we need to, parents need a network of support and access to a system of services. And this is especially true of families in which a single parent, or young parents, are raising children.
- Third, quality matters. Children grow in a developmentally rich manner when they are in environments that are safe, emotionally secure, rich in language, and cognitively challenging. Poor quality settings and experiences are bad for *all* kids, but especially for children who live with some of the risky conditions that I mentioned earlier.
- Fourth, we can look to the answers for these challenges right here in Connecticut. It's not that we haven't created effective models for comprehensive early childhood programs. It's that we haven't committed the resources necessary to bring these successful programs to scale. And that's true whether you are talking about health services, early care and early learning services, or specialized services for children with developmental challenges. We need to reject the "40% solution strategy" whereby our policy leaders solve a part of the problem, move on to other issues, and leave the rest undone.

So, how can we begin to craft a bold new vision for Connecticut?

I must admit to you that, like Lt. Governor Rell, my vision for Connecticut is grounded in an economic construct – the idea of human capital – and the belief that, in the new global

economy, the economic strength of our state and our nation will primarily be determined by the capacity and competence of our human resources.

As a state, we need to address at least four “human capital” goals during the second half of this decade.

- We need a growing number of healthy and competent parents, because family matters.
- We need a base of skilled lifelong learners, because work matters.
- We need many more people to be self-sufficient earners, because economic security matters.
- And we need an even more active citizenry, because in these times of national security and challenges to our civil liberties, democracy matters.

To accomplish these goals, it just makes good common sense to invest our resources at the point where they will provide the greatest return on investment. Based on an increasingly robust scientific literature on the costs and benefits of public investment, we know how to do that. Let’s focus here on young children.

- First, we need the children of this state to be born healthy and then stay healthy and safe. It simply costs more to remediate health problems and the effects of child abuse than to prevent them.
- Second, we need for all of our young children to arrive at the kindergarten door fully ready to take advantage of the first-class educational experience that Connecticut offers them. When we finally do this, we will save thousands of dollars each year in the ever-mounting costs of special education and grade retention that begin early and continue throughout the years of schooling.
- Third, we need for all of Connecticut’s children to become proficient in such basic and essential skills as reading, writing and arithmetic, and we need them to demonstrate this proficiency beginning with our 4th grade CT Mastery Tests.

I will tell you candidly, that while Connecticut has the economic and knowledge capacity to address these goals now, we will make little progress in the current political and budget maelstrom.

We need to resolve the leadership issues in Hartford that occupy so much of everyone’s attention across both of our political parties.

We need to be a lot more honest about some structural budget challenges that are just around the corner, including our spending cap which will limit investments in early childhood even when we figure out where to find the money.

We need all participants in Connecticut’s economy to contribute fairly and equitably to the revenue base that will pay for these re-investments on behalf of our youngest children.

We need to be outcome oriented, and both celebrate and replicate effective programs. And, we should be funding *only* what really works, not what doesn't. If we can't tell the difference, then we need to reinvent better accountability systems and find the courage to use them.

Finally, we need the people who want more investment in child development to sit down at the same table with the people who want more investment in economic development. For those of us here today, that may mean learning a whole new language and looking at a very different literature than we are accustomed to. And it will definitely mean asking the Department of Economic and Community Development and other economic development entities in Connecticut how they spend state money, just as we now ask how the Departments of Education and Social Services spent public monies. And, remember, in the end it's really all OUR money.

Only when we can do this effectively will we be able to devise a plan that accomplishes both children's development and economic development, not one at the expense of the other as is now the case.

So, what can you do – tonight or tomorrow or Saturday?

There is a growing movement among folks like us to send a clear and loud message to policy makers in Connecticut that we *want* all of our young children to come to the kindergarten door healthy, eager to learn and ready for school success... and that we expect our state and local leaders to invest *our* resources to accomplish this, beginning now, with children that are born in 2004.

This citizen campaign is called *Ready, Set, Grow...CT Kids!* and you must become a part of it. All it takes is for you to sign your name – on the cards on your chair or on the website – stating that *you* want all our children to get to school ready. This year, we need one grown up for every child born this year, all 43,000 of them. And we will need more each year when the next batch of babies arrives.

Here's the good news. Just doing this makes you a public *Friend of CT's Young Children*. If you want to do a little more, you can become a *Children's Champion* and, together, we can figure out how to convince our policy makers that they must have a plan for our children's school readiness and health by this time next year and they must begin to use our tax dollars – yours and mine – to make this vision a reality for all of our children.

Lt. Governor Rell, Attorney General Blumenthal, Comptroller Nancy Wyman, State Department of Education Commissioner Betty Sternberg and hundreds of others have all signed on as Friends of CT's Young Children. You'll be in good company. Check it out at – www.readysetgrowctkids.org. It's fast, it's easy, and it's free!

And if you are ever lonely as a grown up, just give me a call. I'll loan you one or two young whippersnappers so *you too* can have a child of your own again!

Thank you so much for the opportunity to put some words on what I know we are all feeling. God Bless. Sign up.

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