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Connecticut Early Care & Education Progress Report, 2012: Executive Summary

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Introduction

It is by now widely known that a child's experiences in her first five years of life can have a lasting impact on her later success, in school and in life. At-risk children who have access to language-rich, nurturing, and responsive caregivers in the early years of life are more likely to be academically and socially ready for kindergarten, less likely to need special education services or be held back a grade, and more likely to graduate from high school and become productive members of the workforce. Given the potential economic benefits of ensuring that our youngest children have access to high-quality early care and education settings and services, and the potential economic harm of failing to do so, it is incumbent upon us to track and evaluate how Connecticut is investing in and serving its youngest residents.



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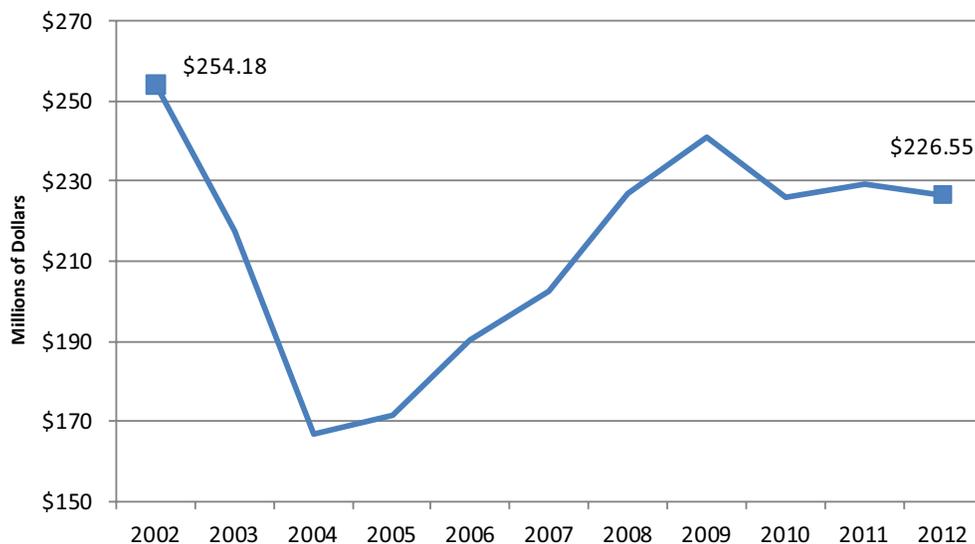
Findings

This report organizes our analysis around five key questions, which have formed the core of our research since the first iteration of this progress report in 2009.

How much is Connecticut spending on early care and education, and how are those dollars being spent?

Total spending on early care and education decreased in Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 from FY 2011 by \$2.63 million (1.1%), a change driven mainly by budget cuts and rescissions to child care and early education services. Total spending remains 11% lower than in FY 02, but \$59.57 million (36%) above FY 04 (the lowest point for ECE spending over the past decade). Though Connecticut is working to design a better system with a strong infrastructure, in FY 12 it continued to have many high-quality programs but poor coordination between them. Spending on quality and infrastructure was just over 4% of the total budget, a negligible increase over the 3% share it occupied in FY 02.

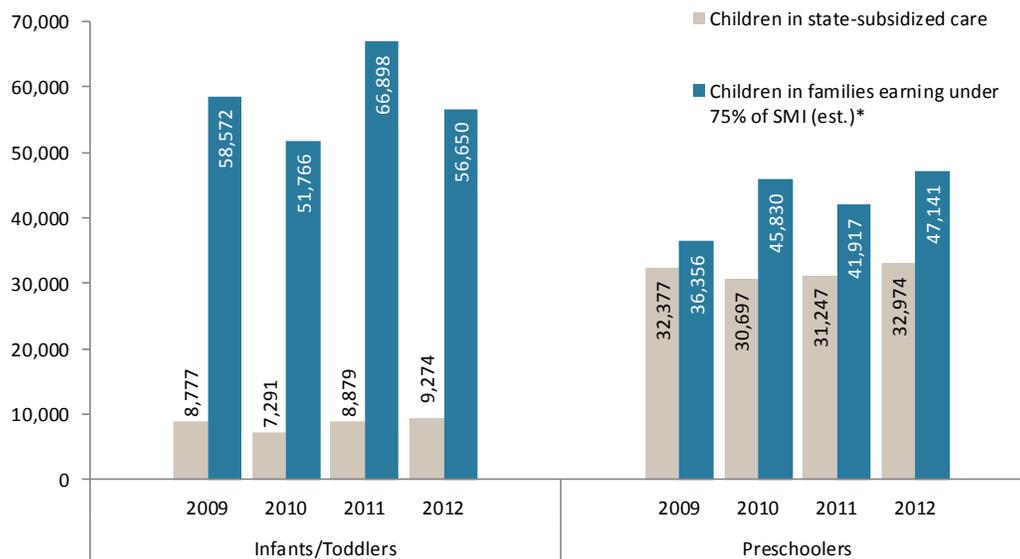
Total Amount Spent on Early Childhood (Adjusted to 2012 Dollars)



How many children is Connecticut serving?

The unduplicated number of children receiving state-subsidized care increased by 395 infants and toddlers (4.4%), and 1,727 preschoolers (5.5%) from 2011 to 2012, for a total of 9,274 infants and toddlers and 33,512 preschoolers receiving services in 2012. However, more than 80% of families earning less than 75% of the state median income who have infants and toddlers, and about 30% of similarly situated families who have preschoolers, still do not have access to any such subsidy for early care and education.

**Access to State-Subsidized Care for Young Children
FY 09 - FY 12**



*Source: Estimates come from CT Voices analysis of US Census Bureau *American Community Survey* 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011 Public Use Microdata Sample

What is the quality of the state-subsidized early care and education settings and services to which Connecticut's children have access?

Last year marked a new high for an important measure of quality: the percent of young children receiving subsidies attending accredited programs. In 2012, this figure reached 35.2% for infants and toddlers and 56.1% for preschoolers, up from 32.6% and 54.6% (respectively) in 2008 (the first year for which we have an unduplicated count). While the increase in children being served in accredited care is undoubtedly positive, we must also acknowledge that nearly two-thirds of infants and toddlers and about half of preschoolers still are *not* served in accredited settings. Furthermore, despite increasingly stringent, statutorily-mandated educational requirements for our early care and education workforce, many teachers and caregivers still lack a bachelor's or associate's degree, and wages continue to be extremely low, making it difficult to attract and retain qualified workers.



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Which Connecticut children are accessing subsidies and services?

Subsidies continue to go predominantly to the most at-risk children, including those who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups, those who come from poor and struggling families, and those who live in communities with high concentrations of children in poverty. Nevertheless, for the 2011-2012 school year, one third of children in the poorest areas had no preschool experience at all, compared to only 3% of children in the richest ones.

How are these children performing in kindergarten and beyond?

Children in the state's most disadvantaged districts are making slow progress but continue to lag far behind their peers in important elementary school performance measures. On a positive note, the percent of kindergartners held back from the first grade in the state's poorest communities (DRG I) fell for the third straight year. However, kindergarten retention rates for children in poor communities are still two times higher than the state average and nearly four times the average in rich communities. Fourth graders in the state's poorest communities (DRG I) made gains in their performance in the reading section of the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT), building on several years of increases, but even with this improvement, only half as many met the "goal" standard as the statewide average and a third as many as in the wealthiest communities (DRG A). The picture is even bleaker in math and writing, where the percentage of DRG I fourth graders meeting "goal" on the CMT stagnated or fell slightly in 2012, while the percentage of their wealthy peers achieving the "goal" standard rose.

Other Concerns

In addition to the major findings organized around our key questions, several other important issues emerged in the report that cut across programs:

- **Data and Quality:** Connecticut state agencies continue to struggle to collect and make available important information about programs and outcomes. Data collection is not coordinated among the various agencies responsible for different programs, and is often flawed or insufficient to allow us to determine basic information about the number and ways in which children are served or the impact of such services. The level of quality varies widely across programs and settings, and there is not always readily available information from which parents can determine the quality of programs or providers can assess if and where improvements must be made.
- **Rates and Funding Streams:** Rates for many programs have not been raised in a number of years (over a decade in the case of Care4Kids). So, while it appears that more children are being served with less money, in reality, parents are shouldering an increasing portion of the costs, and providers are having to make do with less (and struggling to retain quality staff as a result). Because no one funding stream is currently sufficient to fully fund a high-quality slot for infants, toddlers, or preschoolers, programs and parents continue to cobble together funding from multiple sources. This creates confusion, extra paperwork, and a complex web of different regulations and reporting requirements.



Moving Forward: Conclusions and Recommendations

Moving forward, we have reason for optimism.

First, during the 2012 legislative session, the Governor and legislature collaborated to provide significant new money for early care and education. These increases, which began to go into effect in FY 13, include:

- \$6.8 million for 1,000 new School Readiness preschool slots;
- \$9.0 million for quality improvements, including \$6.0 million for the development of a Quality Rating and Improvement System, as well as funding for scholarships to enable members of the early care and education workforce to increase their credentials; and
- \$10 million for capital improvements to early care and education settings.

Though these funding streams, as well as those for existing programs, were affected by the Governor's November 2012 rescissions, if the post-rescission appropriations are fully expended, then FY 13 will still show an increase of 8.0% over FY 12 in spending on early care and education. This will be the greatest amount expended in this area since 2002.

Second, in the 2013 legislative session, the Governor has proposed consolidating early care and education funding streams from five different agencies into one new Office of Early Childhood, which would have the authority to make the policy decisions necessary to create a truly coordinated system that will better serve children and families. This proposal resulted from the yearlong system planning process mandated by the early care planning bill passed in 2011 (Public Act 11-181). The creation of such an Office would allow us to take a huge leap towards creating a coordinated system. While creating an Office of Early Childhood is not an end in and of itself, we believe that it lays the foundation for an early care and education system that is capable of serving children and families effectively and efficiently. The authority over all major early childhood funding, combined with the ability to make important policy decisions, would enable this Office to ensure that our early care and education system includes the eight elements that we consider fundamental:

- **Uniform reporting requirements.** There should be one comprehensive set of reporting requirements for all early care and education providers, which satisfy all statutory mandates and include all data elements necessary for quality assessment and longitudinal analysis.

- ***Unified funding stream.*** Federal and state funding sources must be braided and blended at the state level to create a single stream of revenue that local providers can access.
- ***Fully-funded slots.*** The uniform funding stream described above must be sufficient to fully fund *high quality* slots for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, with the level based on evidence and research as to the real cost of high quality care.
- ***A quality rating and improvement system (QRIS).*** A QRIS increases transparency for families by creating a standard rating system for all early childhood settings, and increases the average quality of all settings by creating incentives and providing technical assistance for improvement. In November 2012, a sub-committee of the Early Childhood Education Cabinet produced a plan for a QRIS in Connecticut, which was an important first step, but this plan must be funded and implemented.
- ***Workforce development and improved workforce compensation.*** Professional development opportunities in the ECE field should be expanded, through methods such as increasing the number of state scholarships available for child care workers or providing subsidies to state institutions of higher education to enlarge their degree programs in early education. Compensation and benefits for ECE workers should be increased to levels that are competitive with jobs in other educational fields.
- ***Coordinated, complete, and transparent data collection.*** Complete and accurate data must be collected, so that we can easily see how much we are spending, whom we are serving, the quality of our services, and the impact of our investments.
- ***Uniform standards for early learning.*** We must ensure that the early learning standards currently being developed for birth through age five are developmentally appropriate, aligned with Common Core standards for kindergarten through grade 12, and disseminated to and implemented in early childhood settings.
- ***Improved outreach to parents and easier access to programs.*** Parents should be able to apply for any and all early care and education programs through a streamlined, efficient application process that would allow them to retain some degree of choice, and would ensure that these choices are based on the best available information as to the availability, quality, and variety of their options.

It remains the case that Connecticut's working families need a comprehensive, accessible, affordable early care and education system to keep parents at work and ensure their children's success. We seem to be moving in that direction. We hope that continues. Connecticut's future depends on it.

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The full report is available on the Connecticut Voices website at www.ctvoices.org.

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