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Early Care Progress Report: Funding Stagnant in Recent Years but New Increases and Proposed Office Are Promising

As state lawmakers consider legislation to establish a new Office of Early Childhood, a report released today finds that funding for early childhood has remained stagnant in recent years. However, the report points to signs of progress, including increased investment in the current fiscal year and improvements in some measures of quality.

“While the stagnant level of early care spending over the last few years has been disappointing, we are very encouraged by plans approved by legislators last year to increase investment, quality, and access,” said Cyd Oppenheimer, Senior Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices and co-author of the report. “Further, the legislative proposal to create an Office of Early Childhood would position Connecticut as a leader among states in ensuring all children have access to a high quality early care and education system.”

The fourth annual early care progress report, which focuses on early care indicators through Fiscal Year 2012 (July 1, 2011 through June 30, 2012), finds:

- **Total spending on early care and education decreased by \$2.6 million (1.1%) between Fiscal Year 2011 and 2012, primarily because of state budget cuts.** Overall spending declined 5.3% from FY 2009 to FY 2012, and total spending on early care remains 11% below the level a decade ago in Fiscal Year 2002.
- **As of October 2011, Connecticut was providing state-subsidized care to 9,274 infants and toddlers and 33,512 preschoolers.** However, more than 80% of low-income families (earning less than 75% of the state median income) who have infants and toddlers, and about 30% of low-income families with preschoolers still did not have access to any such subsidy for early care and education.
- **Connecticut is making progress on some measures of quality.** A greater share of young children who receive state subsidies participate in accredited early care settings, and more program staff have college degrees and early care credentials. However, spending on quality and infrastructure (e.g., coordination, planning, and data collection) remains low, at only 4% of the total early care budget, despite research highlighting the importance of high quality for improved educational outcomes.

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- **The percent of kindergartners held back from the first grade in the state’s poorest school districts fell for the third straight year.** However, kindergarten retention rates for children in poor communities are still twice as high as the statewide average and nearly four times the average for rich communities.

The report pointed to significant new funding and proposed reforms that begin to address problems raised in previous early care progress reports. While this report focuses on trends through Fiscal Year 2012, it found promising signs in increased funding budgeted for the current Fiscal Year (FY 2013, beginning July 2012), including funds for 1,000 new School Readiness preschool slots, quality improvements, and capital improvements for early care facilities. If the funds are spent as budgeted, this would represent an increase of 8% over the previous fiscal year, the largest amount spent on early care and education since 2002.

In addition, during the current 2013 legislative session, the Governor and state legislators are considering the establishment of a new Office of Early Childhood that would consolidate funding streams from multiple agencies into one office with the authority to better coordinate early care services. Connecticut Voices’ previous progress reports have called for reforms to Connecticut’s patchwork of early care and education programs to create a more coordinated and comprehensive system. Connecticut’s publicly-funded early care and education programs rely on multiple funding streams controlled by multiple agencies with varied reporting and eligibility and data requirements, creating confusion and complications for providers and parents, according to Connecticut Voices.

The report recommends that state policymakers:

- Approve the legislation creating a new Office of Early Childhood.
- Use the new Office as an opportunity to better coordinate funding, eligibility guidelines, and reporting requirements for early care programs and make them easier for parents to navigate and access.
- Increase funding for early care programs to create more slots for children, improve quality, expand opportunities for professional development for early care and education staff, and increase compensation for early education teachers in order to attract and retain high-qualified individuals.

“Integrating Connecticut’s early education programs under one roof will be a good start,” said Sarah Esty, Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices and co-author of the report. “But the real benefit for parents will come if the state’s diverse and confusing set of programs and funding sources are streamlined and simplified, and parents can easily access information about the quality and availability of programs.”

Connecticut Voices is a research-based think tank that works to advance policies that benefit the state’s children, youth, and families. The report, “Connecticut Early Care and Education Progress Report, 2012,” can be found on the Connecticut Voices website at www.ctvoices.org. An appendix in the full report contains more detailed data, including town-level figures on children participating in the Head Start, School Readiness, and Care4Kids early care programs.

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