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Analysis: Connecticut State Budget Improves Educational Opportunities for Children and Youth

The final state budget approved by state legislators over the weekend will result in significant improvements in educational opportunities for Connecticut children from preschool through college, according to a new report from Connecticut Voices for Children and its Fiscal Policy Center. The organization praised the major steps taken in the budget plan to expand access to high-quality preschool education.

“As a state, we need to commit to significant, sustained investments in healthy child development and educational opportunity to reverse the course of our alarming and ever-growing achievement gap,” said Ellen Shemitz, Executive Director of Connecticut Voices for Children. “This new budget begins that work with support for a coordinated system of quality early childhood education and investment in expanded school readiness programming.”

The budget plan, along with related early care legislation, significantly expands access to early education through:

- Expanding School Readiness, Connecticut’s major subsidized prekindergarten program for children in high-poverty communities. The proposal will create over 1,000 new slots in the next fiscal year and over 4,000 new spaces in the next 4 years, and will raise reimbursement rates for providers with the goal of increasing quality.
- Creating a new competitive grant program, Smart Start, which gives a financial incentive to school districts to create new pre-kindergarten classrooms. Both the expansion of School Readiness and the implementation of Smart Start are designed to reach the 20 percent of children in the state who enter kindergarten without any preschool experience at all. Funding for Smart Start must still be approved by state legislators.
- Establishing by law an Office of Early Childhood, aimed at improving coordination and planning for the state’s early education system.

“The Governor and state legislators have recognized that it’s not enough just to invest in children. We have to invest right,” said Cyd Oppenheimer, Senior Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices for Children. “This legislation is historic not just because it increases the number of subsidized preschool slots, but because it requires that these slots be of the highest quality. It

takes the first steps in creating an early care and education system that all parents will be able to navigate easily, so that their children may receive all the services they need.”

The approved budget also improves funding for K-12 and higher education:

- An increase for the State Department of Education of \$28 million, including an additional \$7.7 million in the Education Cost Sharing grant, the state’s primary source of education aid to towns; \$11.5 million to comply with the terms of the Sheff settlement, which seeks to ensure a quality, integrated education for Hartford children; and \$12.5 million for magnet schools.
- An additional \$42 million for the Board of Regents, which encompasses community-technical colleges, Connecticut State Universities, and Charter Oak College. This includes both \$23 million appropriated for the new “Transform CSCU” initiative to improve quality and affordability at state colleges and universities, as well as \$19 million, drawn from the reserves of the Connecticut Student Loan Foundation.

“This budget is a strong step toward increasing smart investments in children and our state’s future,” said Wade Gibson, Director of the Fiscal Policy Center at Connecticut Voices for Children. “Going forward, Connecticut policymakers will have the opportunity to build in the progress made in this session and to restore investments in children to the levels they enjoyed in decades past.”

The Fiscal Policy Center at Connecticut Voices for Children provides research, analysis, and recommendations on state and federal budget and tax policies. The analysis, “Valuing Our Children: How the Final Fiscal Year 2015 Budget Revisions Impact Connecticut,” is available on the Connecticut Voices for Children website at www.ctvoices.org. An additional report, “Impact on Early Care and Education of the Final Budget for Fiscal Year 2015,” provides further details on early care program changes.

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