



Investing in the Early Years: A Great Return for Kids and for Connecticut

Universal High-Quality Education

Candidate Briefing
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Investing in the first five years of children's lives benefits children, their parents, and society at large.

Affordable early care and education allows parents to participate in the workforce and sets the stage for the next generation to be productive members of society. There is evidence that children who participate in these programs are less likely to be retained in school, less likely to need special education services, and more likely to graduate from high school.¹ They are also less likely to become involved with the welfare system, less likely to be involved in criminal activity, and more likely to be productively employed.² In other words, children who have access to high-quality early care and education cost society and government less and contribute more.

The first 1,000 days of a child's life are a time of rapid cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and motor development.

For this development to occur, children must receive adequate stimulation. Low-income children are at particular risk for not receiving this stimulation in their own homes. It is possible to improve outcomes for these children by improving prenatal health and nutrition; providing home visitation services and wraparound services in the areas of health, mental health, and social-emotional development; and providing access to language-rich, nurturing, and responsive caregiving during their first three years of life.

Connecticut's funding for infant and toddler care is insufficient to meet the need.

There has been some recognition of the importance of the early years, with the legislature allocating \$15 million more dollars in Fiscal Year (FY) 15³ for the state's child care subsidy program, Care4Kids, which served an average of more than 7,000 infants and toddlers in FY 14 (and almost 14,000 children aged 5-12 as well).⁴ This increase reflects a 3% raise in rates, the first in thirteen years. However, even with the increase, spending on Care4Kids is 27% less than it was in 2002 (adjusted for inflation),⁵ and the rate increase is not nearly sufficient to keep pace with the inflation that has occurred in the past thirteen years.⁶ This means that children receiving Care4Kids still lack access to higher cost and higher quality programs. In addition, the average state reimbursement rate for infants and toddlers in state-funded child care centers is only slightly higher than preschooler rates, despite the fact that it is much costlier to care for infants and toddlers than for preschoolers (since more staff are required). These centers continue to struggle to keep their infant-toddler programs afloat.

Preschool is another critical time for children, necessary to reinforce and continue brain development, vocabulary expansion, and social maturation. Two years in a high-quality

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preschool setting results in dramatic increases in language and literacy skills, math skills, social-emotional skills, and fine motor skills. Preschool attendance has significant impact on kindergarten readiness and performance in kindergarten. It is a critical step to ensuring that children enter school ready to learn and succeed.

Connecticut took huge strides in ensuring universal access to high-quality preschool in the 2014 legislative session,

expanding its School Readiness program by over 1,000 seats, and creating Smart Start, which will increase preschool opportunities for as many as 2,400 children across the state. Both programs require that preschool classrooms be accredited and teachers be certified (important markers of quality). However, we know that there are at least 11,000 3- and 4-year-olds in struggling families⁷ who currently do not receive any state or federally subsidized preschool slot. We must fully implement and build upon these initiatives in the coming years to ensure that all children have the early education experiences that enable them to start school ready to learn.

We must invest in parents and teachers as well as in children. We must take a two-generational approach, investing in programs that promote child development while at the same time enabling parents to work and to move out of poverty. We must, as well, ensure that we can attract and retain high-quality teachers. Although recent legislation has heightened the educational requirements for many early care and education workers, salaries remain too low and opportunities to obtain higher degrees remain costly and inaccessible. Significant changes in scholarship opportunities and compensation will have to be made if we are to create a strong, sustainable early care and education workforce that our youngest children deserve.

Connecticut is on its way to building an early care and education system that works for children and families. Our state proved itself a leader in innovation this past legislative session by creating the Office of Early Childhood, which brings together under one roof all major state programs that serve our youngest children. This is a foundational step to creating a true system that will reduce bureaucracy, facilitate access, ensure uniform standards, hold programs accountable, and heighten the quality of all state-subsidized



programs. The creation of the Office was not an end but a beginning; we must ensure its work continues.

Connecticut can improve the quality of its early care and education programs and expand access to services by:

- Increasing per-child funding for all state-subsidized early care and education programs based on the actual cost of providing high quality programs;
- Increasing funding for professional development and scholarship assistance for child care staff;
- Continuing to expand the number of early care and education subsidies so that all eligible children have access to programs;
- Expanding consultation and wraparound services in the areas of children's health, mental health, and social-emotional development;
- Ensuring that all of our programs are designed to identify and meet the needs of parents and children together; and
- **Most importantly,** continuing to track, support, and finance the work of the Office of Early Childhood as it creates an effective early childhood system for children and families, so that our children can succeed in school and beyond.

1 Susan H. Landry, "Effective Early Childhood Programs," The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (2005).
2 Reynolds, Temple, Roberson, & Mann, Chicago Longitudinal Study.
3 Bill No. 5596, "An Act Making Adjustments to State Expenditures and Revenues for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2015," Connecticut General Assembly, (February Session 2014).
4 Connecticut Department of Social Services, "Number of Children Paid by Age Category and Service Setting."
5 In Fiscal Year 2002, Connecticut spent \$121.59 million on Care4Kids (Connecticut 2003-2005 Biennial Budget, p.395), \$160.79 million in 2014 inflation-adjusted dollars (Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator). The legislature appropriated \$116.72 million for Care4Kids for FY 2015 (see Bill No. 5596, "An Act Making Adjustments to State Expenditures and Revenues for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2015," Connecticut General Assembly, (February Session 2014).
6 To illustrate: the new average rate for an infant in a child care center will be \$205/week, whereas had the 2002 rate (\$199/week) been adjusted for inflation, it would have been \$263.
7 We define struggling families as families earning under 75% of the State Median Income: \$64,999 for a family of three.