

Testimony Supporting Senate Bill 1101: An Act Concerning the Office of Early Childhood

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Education Committee

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Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, and Distinguished Members of the Committee on Children:

My name is Sarah Iverson and I am a Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that promotes the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

On behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children I am testifying **in support of S.B. 1101: An Act Concerning the Office of Early Childhood**. We support the following technical revisions to the statutes relating to the Office of Early Childhood:

- Changing the method by which School Readiness funds are allocated to Competitive School Districts, from a capped grant amount to an amount based on preschool slots multiplied by the cost per child.
- Increasing the cap, from \$500,000 to \$1 million, on the amount of unexpended, surplus School Readiness funds that can be used for professional development.
- Eliminating the eight-month redetermination period for Care4Kids and eliminating the ability of the Commissioner administering the program to change the redetermination period to six months.

In addition, we support the following two proposals, but respectfully offer the following suggestions that would further help achieve the goals of S.B. 1101:

- Eliminating the Unmet Need report, which is limited to assessing the unmet need for preschool in School Readiness Priority School Districts and has no quality assurance measures. However, in its stead, the Office of Early Childhood should be required to produce an annual, data-driven report assessing the state-wide unmet need for preschool and infant and toddler care, capturing racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and geographic disparities in access.
- Eliminating the residency requirement for School Readiness in Priority School Districts, which, as it exists, prevents programs from serving at-risk children who live outside their town borders. However, in order to ensure that these most high-need Districts are maximizing efforts to serve the populations most difficult to reach, we suggest:
 - 1) these Districts be limited to offering no more than 10% of their slots to non-residents;
 - 2) prior to offering slots to non-residents, these Districts be required to make documented efforts to identify and reach at-risk populations within the district, and that these efforts be deemed sufficient by the Office of Early Childhood;
 - 3) slots not be offered to non-residents until three months after the start of the state fiscal year, to allow time for outreach within the District; and
 - 4) eligibility to non-residents be limited to those earning under 75% of the State Median Income.

In passing S.B. 1101, with the aforementioned changes, Connecticut Voices for Children believes that we will be one step closer to a Connecticut where all children have access to high-quality, comprehensive early care and education.

Changes to School Readiness

We support changing the way School Readiness funds are allocated to Competitive School Districts from a capped grant amount to an amount based on preschool slots multiplied by the cost per child, which is the way that School Readiness funds are currently allocated to Priority School Districts.

This change will more equitably distribute School Readiness funding based on the needs of children, rather than based on an arbitrary dollar amount. This change also promotes a more systemic approach to early childhood funding, by creating some uniformity in how funds are distributed.

Further, we support increasing the cap, from \$500,000 to \$1 million, on the amount of unexpended, surplus School Readiness funds that the Office of Early Childhood can use for the professional development of early child care and education program providers and staff members. **Research shows that professionalizing the field of child care, by providing increased professional development in conjunction with increasing wages, leads to higher quality care, including an increase in the number of positive interactions between providers and children.**¹

Moreover, research shows that the multiple long-term benefits reaped by early care and education are only realized if programs are of high-quality.² Since Connecticut requires, by 2020, that all lead teachers hold a bachelor's degree in preschool programs accepting state funds, including School Readiness funds, it is crucial that the State provide necessary supports and resources for child care workers to obtain a bachelor's degree.³ However, the current low rate of pay for child care workers impedes their ability to afford the classes necessary to obtain a bachelor's degree, as well as creates a disincentive for child care workers to remain in the early care and education field and develop the skills necessary to offer high-quality early care and education.⁴ In order to satisfy the 2020 mandate, additional funds can be used for scholarships.

We also support eliminating the Unmet Need report.⁵ In its current form, the Unmet Need report has significant limitations. It is limited to assessing the unmet need for preschool in School Readiness Priority School Districts, but does not look at the need state-wide. There are no standardized methods whereby School Readiness Councils collect the data for their individual reports, and there are no quality assurance measures to ensure this data is valid and reliable. Additionally, this report looks only at the need for preschool and not at the need for child care more broadly. In particular, it pays no heed to the need for infant and toddler care.

However, rather than merely eliminating this report, the Office of Early Childhood should be required to produce an annual better, broader Unmet Need report in its stead. Specifically, this report must be grounded in reliable data, and should assess the **state-wide** unmet need for both preschool and infant and toddler care. The report must pay special attention to racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and geographic disparities in access, in order to understand which populations lack access to high-quality early care and education services and the particular obstacles they face in accessing such services. By identifying these populations and the obstacles they face, this report can provide the groundwork for policy solutions to address these obstacles and ensure access for all.

Finally, we support eliminating the residency requirement for School Readiness in Priority School Districts, which, as it exists, prevents programs from serving at-risk children who live outside their town borders. There are children living in poverty throughout the state, not merely in our highest-need districts, and many of these children do not currently have access to high-quality preschool. As long as there are children without access to preschool, School Readiness slots should not be allowed to remain unfilled.

However, while we know that some of the Priority School Districts have struggled to fill their School Readiness slots, the percentage of children entering kindergarten who report having a preschool experience is still relatively low: between 65% and 75%. These numbers suggest that there are 3- and 4-year-olds within these districts who could be served by School Readiness slots but who are not being reached. Many of these children are likely those who are the most at-risk: English-language learners, homeless, born to a single parent who may not have a high school degree, and so on.⁶ In order to ensure that our Priority School Districts are doing all in their power to reach these children, rather than simply offering open School Readiness slots to children outside the district, we recommend that the provisions described be added to S.B. 1101.

Changes to Care4Kids

We support eliminating the eight month redetermination period for Care4Kids and the elimination of the ability of the Commissioner administering the program to change the redetermination period to six months. These changes would place Connecticut in compliance with the newly reauthorized Child Care Development Block Grant Act, which requires that redetermination take place not more than once a year.⁷ This change will allow a higher degree of consistency in care, which promotes emotional, cognitive, and social development, and helps children feel secure and comfortable.⁸ Continuity of care is critical for development, particularly in very young children. Children who experience fewer changes in child care providers during their earliest years demonstrate more outgoing and less aggressive behaviors in preschool and kindergarten.⁹ Sustained stable relationships with caregivers allow children to form positive, secure attachments, which build the healthy brain architecture that increases the odds of desirable outcomes – including health, academic, and emotional – later in life.¹⁰

In sum, S.B. 1101 makes important changes to the Office of Early Childhood that increase access to preschool and work toward ensuring that existing slots are high-quality. However, we urge the Committee to consider our aforementioned recommended changes to the proposed statute as well.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. Please do not hesitate to reach out to myself or any other staff members with any questions.

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1 *See*, Whitebrook, M., Phillips, D., & Howes, C., "Worthy Work, STILL Unlivable Wages: The Early Childhood Workforce 25 years after the National Child Care Staffing Study," Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (2014), available at <http://www.irle.berkeley.edu/cscce/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/ReportFINAL.pdf>.

2 *See*, Espinosa, Linda M., "High-Quality Preschool: Why We Need It and What it Looks Like," National Institute for Early Education Research (November 2002), available at <http://nieer.org/resources/policybriefs/1.pdf>.

3 *See*, "S.B. 927: An Act Concerning Requirements for Early Childhood Educations," Connecticut General Assembly (March 2011), available at <http://cga.ct.gov/2011/ba/2011SB-00927-R01-BA.htm>.

4 *See*, Whitebrook, M., Phillips, D., & Howes, C., "Worthy Work, STILL Unlivable Wages: The Early Childhood Workforce 25 years after the National Child Care Staffing Study," Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (2014), available at <http://www.irle.berkeley.edu/cscce/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/ReportFINAL.pdf>.

5 The "School Readiness Need and the Costs to Serve all 3- and 4-year-old Children in 19 Priority School Districts" report is a summation of local School Readiness Council reports written by the Office of Early Childhood, and provides "a history of previously submitted reports and recommendations for consideration regarding reducing the number of children and need of a center-based preschool experience, while increasing the quality of such programs and recommendations for addressing broader early childhood issues." Local School Readiness Councils conduct a survey to determine "the number of children not being served and whose parents desire a program" and "the type of spaces such children need, e.g., full-day/full-year, school-day/school-year, and part-day/part-year programs." *For more information, see* "School Readiness Need and the Costs to Serve all 3- and 4-year-old Children in 19 Priority School Districts," Connecticut State Department of Education (2012), available at http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/DEPS/Readiness/SR_Report.pdf.

6 *See*, Barnett, W. Steven and Yarosz, Donald J., "Who Goes to Preschool and Why Does it Matter?" National Institute for Early Education Research (2015), available at <http://nieer.org/resources/policybriefs/15.pdf>. *See also*, "Starting Out Right: Pre-K and Kindergarten: Full Report," Center for Public Education (February 2012), available at <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Organizing-a-school/Starting-Out-Right-Pre-K-and-Kindergarten/Starting-Out-Right-Pre-K-and-Kindergarten-full-report.html>.

7 *See*, "The Child Care and Development Block Grant Reauthorization: Changes to Previous Law," National Women's Law Center (December 2014), available at http://www.nwlc.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/ccdbg_reauthorization_comparison_chart_final_12_01_14dox_2.pdf.

8 *See*, Schumacher, Rachel and Hoffman, Elizabeth, "Continuity of Care: Charting Progress for Babies in Child Care Research-Based Rationale," Center for Law and Social Policy, (August 2008), available at: <http://www.policyarchive.org/handle/10207/bitstreams/13791.pdf>.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*