

Testimony Regarding H.B. 5306: An Act Concerning Recommendations of the Office of Early Childhood and H.B. 5307 An Act Prohibiting the Unreasonable Delay of Enrolling a Child in Kindergarten

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Education Committee

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

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

Connecticut Voices for Children supports H.B. 5306: An Act Concerning Recommendations of the Office of Early Childhood and H.B. 5307: An Act Prohibiting the Unreasonable Delay of Enrolling a Child Kindergarten. Both bills take important steps to reduce socioeconomic disparities in access to high-quality early childhood experiences, and align Connecticut with national early care and education best practices.

1. Connecticut Voices for Children supports H.B. 5307, which would expand the eligibility requirements for Care 4 Kids, Connecticut's largest child care subsidy program. By making families with incomes up to 85 percent of the state median income (SMI) eligible for Care 4 Kids, H.B. 5307 would bring Connecticut into compliance with new federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) regulations.¹ On average, the cost of child care in Connecticut is \$13,241 a year, or 43.4 percent of the income of the average single mother in Connecticut.² By subsidizing child care costs for low- to moderate-income working families, Care 4 Kids allows many of these families to obtain safe and affordable child care for their children that would otherwise be unavailable to them.

However, in order to ensure that Care 4 Kids can serve families up to 85 percent SMI, as well as the populations it currently serves, the legislature must not simply expand eligibility, but must also expand funding for the program. Without increased funds to support such increased eligibility, new applicants may be denied access to this crucial subsidy program. The Governor proposes to flat fund Care 4 Kids (\$122.1 million) in Fiscal Year 2017, which will not be sufficient to maintain care for all children eligible for the program.

In addition, in these hard budget times we must ensure that expanding Care 4 Kids eligibility does not come at the expense of subsidized child care for our most vulnerable children, who are currently able to access this important child care subsidy. In particular, we must continue to prioritize families on the state's temporary cash assistance (TFA) program who are working, families transitioning off of TFA, teen parents, and other working families with annual incomes less than 50 percent SMI.³ We must ensure that expanding eligibility to families up to 85 percent SMI will not result in access to Care 4 Kids closing for our neediest families.

Finally, we must also ensure that child care workers receive fair compensation. It costs more to attract and retain caregivers with the education and training necessary to offer a high-quality early childhood experience. Studies show that the multiple long-term benefits reaped by early care and education are only realized if programs are of high-quality, and that children attending high-quality preschool programs make cognitive, behavioral, and emotional gains that last well beyond the earliest years.⁴ Increasing compensation for Connecticut's child care workers will improve the quality of our early childhood education. Moreover, compensation for child care workers varies by setting: in Connecticut, providers in child development centers are currently paid less than family child care and nith and kin providers.⁵ To develop a comprehensive, high-quality early childhood system, we must pay child care workers adequately by raising the per-child Care 4 Kids expenditure, and ensure compensation parity between providers in different settings.

2. Connecticut Voices for Children supports H.B. 5307, which would limit the circumstances in which parents may hold their child from enrolling in kindergarten until the child is seven years old. As reported in the Office of Early Childhood's "Report on Changing the Kindergarten Entry Date,"⁶ children in wealthier school districts are more likely to be held out of kindergarten ("redshirting"), presumably because their parents can pay for an additional year of high-quality preschool. This delay in kindergarten entrance exacerbates the achievement gap between Connecticut's children from more affluent and poor/working class families, who may not be able to afford to delay their child's entrance into kindergarten. In addition, research shows that socioeconomic status and preschool experience are better indicators of kindergarten performance than age.⁷

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please feel free to contact me if you have questions or need additional information.

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¹ See Office of Early Childhood, "Child Care Development Fund Reauthorization" (January 2016), available at <http://www.ct.gov/oec/cwp/view.asp?a=4547&q=574712>.

² Fraga, Lynette and McCreedy, Michelle, "Parents and the High Cost of Child Care," (2014), available at <http://cca.worksmartsuite.com/UserEditFormFilling.aspx>.

³ See Office of Early Childhood, "Care 4 Kids Regulations" (June 2015), available at <http://www.ct.gov/oec/cwp/view.asp?a=4541&q=545048>.

⁴ 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>

⁵ Iverson, Sarah, Leventhal-Weiner, Rachel, and Oppenheimer, Cyd, "Impact on Early Care and Education of the Final Budget for Fiscal Year 16 and 17," Connecticut Voices for Children (July 2015), available at <http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/impact-early-care-and-education-final-budget-fiscal-year-16-and-17>.

⁶ See Office of Early Childhood, "Connecticut Office of Early Childhood Report on Changing the Kindergarten Entry Date" (2015), available at http://www.ct.gov/oec/lib/oec/earlycare/kindergarten_entry_date_report.pdf.

⁷ Deborah Stipek. "At What Age Should Children Enter Kindergarten: A Question for Policymakers and Parents." Social Policy Report XVI:2 (2002), available at http://www.srcd.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=120, citing Molly M. Jones and Garrett K. Mandeville, "The Effect of Age at School Entry on Reading Achievement Scores Among South Carolina Students," Remedial and Special Education (March/April 1990) 11: 56-62.