



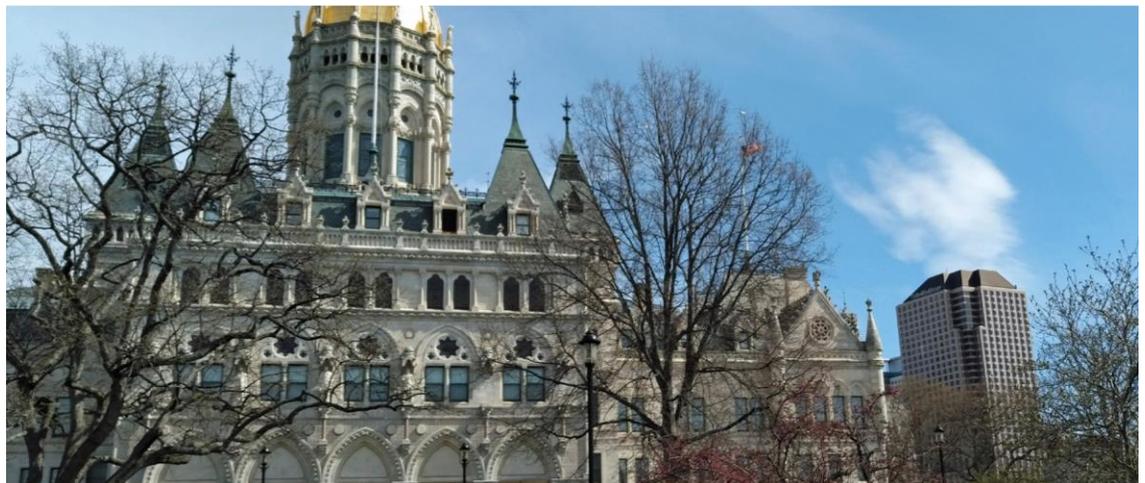
## 2019 Legislative Session Review

### Legislative Brief July 2019

*Connecticut Voices  
for Children's Staff*

Following a gubernatorial and legislative election cycle, Connecticut's political landscape experienced large changes in 2019. Times of transition create opportunities to enact policies that will increase the health, well-being, success, and stability of children and families in our state. A status quo budget plan approved by policymakers preserved many programs for children and families, but did not offer many bold new investments or make needed reforms to the state budget caps that constrain our ability to expand investments in children. However, other policy changes mark the beginning of positive shifts toward a Connecticut where *all* children and families can thrive. These new policies are the result of tireless advocacy by legislators, policymakers, partner organizations, and the team at Connecticut Voices for Children.

Lawmakers approved Paid Family and Medical Leave after decades of debate, restored Medicaid eligibility to thousands of parents, raised the minimum wage to \$15 by 2023, and increased reimbursement rates to Care 4 Kids childcare providers. These policy changes will help ensure that families do not have to choose between caring for their loved ones and earning a living wage, that low-income parents have the services needed to be the healthiest parents they can be, that full-time workers have some additional income to help meet their basic needs, and that early care and education providers serving low-income families can better cover their costs.



Policymakers also enacted policies that will benefit smaller, more vulnerable populations. As the result of recommendations made during Connecticut Voices for Children's 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Youth at the Capitol Day event, legislators passed a bill codifying and expanding the Department of Children and Families' Adolescent Bill of Rights, which will help ensure that youth in foster care are able to advocate for themselves when they do not receive the support they need to thrive. Legislators also extended important diversionary services to youth with fire starting and car-theft behaviors so that these youth can receive the therapeutic help they need to engage in more prosocial behaviors going forward.

Finally, lawmakers rejected numerous proposals that would have rolled back policies that improve racial and economic equity, including a bill that would have prohibited disaggregating education data by ethnicity and bills to transfer more youth to the adult justice system. This report will outline the details of key successes for children and families, as well as some continuing needs for reform.

### *State Budget*

Connecticut Voices for Children believes that the state budget is a statement of the values and priorities of our state. We advocate for a fair and adequate tax system that supports state budget investments that promote the well-being and economic security of all the state's children and families. While policymakers took steps to preserve programs important to children and families, they missed the opportunity to make reforms to our revenue system and budget rules that could prevent more cuts in future years.

### *Status quo budget*

Overall, the State's biennial budget for Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021 ([Public Act 19-117](#)) could be characterized as a status quo budget. It avoids drastic cuts in state spending and raises some new revenues but does not address the overall regressive nature of Connecticut's state and local tax structure or make the kind of bold, new investments in the future of children and families that our state needs.

Importantly, the budget does address issues that had long created uncertainty for Connecticut's budget and economic future. These include the use of FY 2019 surplus dollars to help resolve the ongoing controversy over the hospital tax and the unfunded liability of the Teachers' Retirement System. The budget also addresses the \$3.7 billion shortfall that had been projected for the biennium through a combination of enhancing revenues, cutting projected expenses, and using surplus dollars and carry-forwards from FY 2019.

For many of the programs important to Connecticut's children and families, the generally flat funding in this budget was disappointing, though still an improvement over the cuts of the last few years. Important program and service areas that were preserved include early childhood education, K-12 education, higher education, behavioral health, and juvenile justice. Also noteworthy is the partial restoration of Medicaid income eligibility levels for parents that had been reduced in 2015.

The state's rigid budget rules—including the spending cap, volatility cap, and Bond Lock—are preventing policymakers from making important new investments in areas such as schools, infrastructure, and child care. While sympathetic legislators were unable to amass the votes necessary to amend the caps, we held myriad meetings with lawmakers and advocates to educate them about the impact of the caps. We thank them for their time and leadership on this very difficult issue. We also applaud the Finance, Revenue & Bonding Committee for passing the capital gains surcharge on the highest income Connecticut taxpayers, a bill that was a top priority for Connecticut Voices. Unfortunately, the proposal was opposed by the Governor and did not make it into the final budget. Legislative leaders rejected efforts to weaken or eliminate the estate tax—proposals that would have made Connecticut's revenue system even more regressive and which Voices strongly opposed.

For a more in-depth analysis of the state budget, see our recent report, [Impact of the Final FY 2020-2021 Budget on Children and Families](#).

*Key legislative successes:*

- Defended against proposals to eliminate the estate tax.

*Family Economic Security*

Connecticut Voices' family economic security policy work seeks to prioritize proven investments that develop our human capital, including children and young adults, create and sustain high-quality permanent jobs, broaden prosperity and economic opportunities for all state residents, help workers and families achieve a living wage, and provide equal education opportunities for all children. Thus we were especially pleased this session that two of our top priorities were realized: increasing the minimum wage, and providing paid family medical leave. We appreciate the work of the Governor and legislators who made these bills a priority and saw them to fruition this year.

*Paid family leave adopted*

After decades-long debate and opposition, Connecticut has joined a growing list of states that offer paid family and medical leave beginning in 2022 ([P.A. 19-25](#)). This is a particular triumph for workers of color, who make up a sizable portion of low-wage jobs that typically do not provide paid leave and who have difficulty meeting unexpected medical costs and lost income. The new Connecticut Paid Family and Medical Leave plan is estimated to cover approximately 103,600 employers and 1.4 million employees in the state. It mandates that private employers with one or more employees provide 12 weeks of paid family leave, funded by a 0.5 percent payroll tax levied on all employees. The payable leave is on a sliding scale ranging up to a maximum of 95 percent of wages for minimum-wage earners and at a maximum of \$600 a week. This makes the Connecticut Paid Family and Medical Leave plan the most generous paid family plan in the country. It is not limited only to maternity and paternity leave, but also covers anyone who needs to take time off to care for a family member, or even a close friend who is the equivalent of a family member.



*Minimum wage hike*

A majority vote in Connecticut's Senate established the Nutmeg State as the fourth state this year to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour ([P.A. 19-4](#)). The minimum wage, currently set at \$10.10, will see a \$1 increase per year until it hits the \$15 mark in 2023. This is a particularly important step, because it increases the earnings of over 30 percent of Connecticut workers, — of which approximately 43.7 percent are Black, 54.5 percent are Latino, and 25 percent are parents. The state's increased minimum wage will also keep Connecticut competitive with surrounding states that have also passed a \$15 minimum wage. However, it is important to understand that raising the minimum wage may decrease access to certain public services. Unless Connecticut revises its eligibility requirements for many of its public support systems, the new minimum wage will generate a "cliff effect," in which some working families will suddenly become ineligible for benefits they require, such as Medicaid, housing, and child care subsidies. In addition, the higher minimum wage still falls far short of the income needed for a Connecticut family to meet their basic needs.

*Key legislative successes:*

- Minimum wage increased to \$15.
- Paid family and medical leave passed.

## Child Welfare

Youth in the care of the Department of Children and Families (DCF) deserve safe and supportive environments that honor the unique identities of youth in care and help them reach their full potential. This legislative session, the General Assembly passed three bills that will help make this happen through protecting the rights of adolescents in care, continuing the work of the Voluntary Services taskforce, and creating a Health and Human Services network to better serve individuals with queer identities.

### *Protecting youth in care*

Lawmakers passed [P.A. 19-44](#): An Act Concerning a Children in Care Bill of Rights and Expectations with the strong support of Connecticut Voices, DCF's Youth Advisory Boards, and the DCF Commissioner. This bill originated as a policy recommendation inspired by the stories heard from youth in care at Connecticut Voices' 8th Annual Youth at the Capitol Day on Identity Development. The act will codify and update the Adolescent Bill of Rights and Expectations created by youth in care that currently exists in DCF policy. The act also requires social workers to share the Bill of Rights with adolescent youth, providing a tool for youth to understand and advocate for their rights. Ultimately, we believe that this legislation will create stronger protections for adolescents and young adults in care, and allow them the space and support as they explore their identities.

Connecticut Voices also supported [Special Act 19-9](#), which will extend the reporting deadline of a taskforce studying voluntary admission into DCF by one year, to 2020. We hope that the extension will allow the taskforce to reach full membership and to take the time needed to develop careful recommendations on voluntary DCF admission.

### *Change across systems*

Connecticut Voices for Children advocated for two bills that would impact youth in care by encouraging change across Connecticut's human services system.

Connecticut Voices supported the portion of [P.A. 19-117](#) that establishes a Health and Human Services

Network to make recommendations on how the state can better serve members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer + (LGBTQ+) community. The Network will bring together experts around the state from LGBTQ+ advocacy and aid organizations. Voices believes the work of this Network will make Connecticut a safer and more supportive state for LGBTQ youth.



We also supported [S.B. 452](#): An Act Establishing the Child Welfare and Policy Oversight Committee, which would have created a council composed of members from multiple agencies in Connecticut, including the Office of the Child Advocate, Office of Early Childhood, and the Department of Developmental Services, among others. The multi-agency bill would have provided a vehicle for continued monitoring of child welfare after Connecticut exits from under the Juan F. Consent Decree and creation of more cross-agency collaboration, allowing Connecticut to better serve children in DCF care. Unfortunately, this bill did not receive a vote in the House of Representatives.

### *Key legislative successes:*

- Protected the rights of youth in foster care.
- Extended the reporting deadline of the Task Force to Study Voluntary DCF Admissions.
- Established a network to make recommendations on how the state can better serve members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer + (LGBTQ+) community.

## *Juvenile Justice*

Connecticut Voices for Children advocates ending the criminalization of children and youth. Children and youth are less likely to engage in socially harmful behaviors when their physical, emotional, and educational needs are met. When children and youth do engage in socially harmful behaviors, therapeutic responses are more effective and humane than punitive responses.

Our work at the Capitol this session focused on expanding appropriations to the Judicial Branch, creating new funding mechanisms to support critical diversionary services, responding to serious behaviors with rehabilitative services, system transparency, and the humane treatment of youth prosecuted through the adult criminal system. This work was part of a large team effort with members of the Juvenile Justice Alliance Steering Committee and the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee workgroups—both groups Connecticut Voices for Children actively participate in—and the American Civil Liberties Union Smart Justice campaign.

### *Providing adequate funding for juvenile justice reforms*

We celebrate that the final budget ([P.A.19-117](#)) appropriated funding to the Judicial Branch. This funding will allow the Court Support Services Division to establish small community-based hardware secure facilities for youth with high levels of need; allow the Judicial Branch to expand vocational services for youth in their care; and support the work of planning, implementation, and evaluation work done by Local Interagency Service Teams. The final budget also created a new line item within the Department of Children and Families' budget to support diversionary work done by Juvenile Review Boards.

### *Expanding diversion opportunities*

We also celebrate the passage of bills that expand therapeutic services for youth who have engaged in serious behaviors and increasing justice system transparency. [P.A. 19-135](#) allows courts to offer

treatment to youth who have engaged in fire starting behaviors, and [P.A.19-110](#) allows courts to offer treatment to youth who have stolen cars. [P.A. 19-59](#) mandates the collection and reporting of prosecutorial data, which will help Connecticut identify areas to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in the justice process and ensure a fair justice system. This bill did not include reporting on juvenile justice data; Connecticut Voices for Children will continue to advocate for the inclusion of aggregated, non-identifiable juvenile data.

### *Humane care for justice-involved youth*

[P.A. 19-187](#) passed many of this year's recommendations made by the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee, such as requiring the Manson Youth Institute (MYI) and detention centers to hire ombudspople to navigate youth and family complaints and making the records of cases transferred from juvenile to adult court confidential. However, the final bill removed language that would have transferred youth under the age of 18 out of MYI. Additionally, the legislature failed to pass [S.B. 1109](#), which would have banned the use of solitary confinement in correctional facilities. Connecticut Voices intends to continue advocating for passage of these two measures next session.

### *Key legislative successes:*

- Increased Judicial Branch funding for juvenile facilities and vocational services and restoration of funding for Juvenile Review Boards and Local Interagency Service Teams.
- Therapeutic diversion services for youth who start fires or steal cars.
- Reporting of prosecutorial data.
- Defeated bills that would charge juveniles who steal cars as adults.

## *Health*

Connecticut Voices for Children believes that access to robust, family-centered health services can address the barriers to health faced by communities affected by structural racism and related economic circumstances.

Health insurance provides a safeguard against financial risk in the event of unexpected illness and access to care for chronic illnesses like heart disease or asthma. By reforming how our health system works, we can also bridge barriers to care for families whose need for food, shelter, or help navigating the health system may prevent them from getting and staying healthy. During this session, the Connecticut General Assembly advanced policies that will help more families access quality health services by restoring HUSKY eligibility for some parents, improve access to preventive health care for youth, and create a certification process for community health workers.

#### *Restoration of HUSKY eligibility for some parents*

The General Assembly continued a positive trend in health insurance coverage by providing a slight increase in parent income eligibility for the HUSKY A (Medicaid) program, from 155 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) to 160 percent FPL. In 2015, parent income eligibility for HUSKY A was reduced from 201 percent FPL to 155 percent FPL. In 2017, parent eligibility was reduced again to 138 percent FPL. In 2018, the CGA then reversed the 2017 cut, setting parent eligibility at 155 percent FPL once again. The recently approved budget included an additional small increase, which will be effective on October 1, 2019. Parents will be eligible when their family income is up to 160 percent FPL (\$41,200 for a family of four).

Ultimately, this change will have a profound impact on the roughly 4,000 parents/caregivers who will once again be eligible for HUSKY services, but it does not fully restore the program to prior levels. As the minimum wage increases in the coming years, it is vital that Connecticut take steps to maximize access to health insurance for parents whose gradual increase in wages could result in the loss of valuable services that offer access to health care and, as a result, the ability to work and parent well. Several health advocates, particularly those focused on the public option, played a role in this success as did key legislators.



In other changes proposed to the HUSKY programs, the state budget assumes cost savings due to programs such as supportive housing and hospital readmission rate reduction, but details are not yet available. An effort to expand HUSKY programs to all immigrant children ([H.B.1053](#)) failed, as did several proposals to improve administrative efficiencies by, for example, streamlining transitions among HUSKY programs ([S.B. 836](#)).

#### *Discussion of public option advanced*

Proposals to create a public health insurance option ([H.B. 7267](#), [H.B. 7339](#), and [S.B. 134](#)) were another effort to ensure health insurance coverage for families in the state. Connecticut is home to about 190,000 people who do not have health insurance, and uninsured rates are particularly high for people of color and people earning \$25,000 to \$50,000 per year (typically just over the income limits for HUSKY Health programs, depending on family size). Advocates at the Universal Healthcare Foundation of Connecticut and Connecticut Citizen's Action Group worked tirelessly on this effort. As the out-of-pocket costs of health care grow, more and more of our state's families are in need of affordable, quality health insurance.

While public option proposals were not ultimately approved this legislative session, we look forward to an ongoing conversation about solutions to this concern in the years ahead.

### *Support for community health workers*

Provisions to create a certification process for community health workers (originally [S.B. 859](#)) were included in the state budget ([P.A. 19-117](#)). This important step towards health equity was championed by Health Equity Solutions and grounded in work done by the State Innovation Model Community Health Worker Advisory Committee. Certification will make community health workers a more sustainable part of our health care system and allow them to continue to close the gap between a family's individual circumstances and the opportunity to be as healthy as possible.

A similar effort to create a certification process and Medicaid reimbursement for doulas ([S.B. 1078](#)) was unsuccessful. We look forward to continuing to work with our partners who led this effort and laid the groundwork for advancing key supports for women of color who experience disproportionately high rates of preventable deaths and complications from childbirth. Research suggests that having a doula advocate for a pregnant woman can decrease unnecessary cesarean rates and call attention to potential complications.

### *Additional public health legislation*

Several public health efforts succeeded this session including a law that allows minors to access HIV prophylaxis medication ([P.A. 19-109](#)) without parental consent. Passage of this bill is thanks to the efforts of Planned Parenthood and the Center for Children's Advocacy, among others. Additional bills to ban ghost guns ([P.A. 19-6](#)), safeguard weapons in homes with minors present ([P.A. 19-5](#)), and raise the age for purchasing tobacco products to 21 ([P.A. 19-13](#)) were successful. A tax on e-cigarettes was also included in the state budget. Unfortunately, a bill proposing that Connecticut adhere to national standards for

intervention in cases of lead exposure ([H.B. 7133](#)) failed, as did a proposal to allow parents to cover young adults up to age 26 on their dental insurance ([H.B. 5627](#)). We hope to work with our partners on these important efforts in the future.

### *Key legislative successes:*

- Parent income eligibility for HUSKY A restored from 155 percent to 160 percent of the Federal Poverty Level.
- Community health worker certification process established.
- Minors enabled to access to HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).

### *Early Care and Education*

Connecticut families need a strong and reliable early care and education system. Affordable and accessible quality child care gives children a solid foundation and allows parents the opportunity to work or pursue education. This year Care 4 Kids received a small but important increase in the budget that will allow for increases to provider reimbursement rates. While this increase will make it easier for families receiving Care 4 Kids assistance to access high quality child care, three other bills which could have further increased access to child care failed to pass.

### *Care 4 Kids expansion proposals*

Care 4 Kids received a modest budget increase, largely due to federal funding streams, that will allow provider reimbursement rates to be increased to 25 percent of the market rate. This boost will expand access to quality childcare for families receiving Care 4 Kids funding, and is a massive increase from current provider reimbursement rates, some of which are as low as 4 percent. However, a 25 percent reimbursement rate is still far less than the federally recommended rate of 75 percent.

While this increase will be beneficial to families and providers in the Care 4 Kids system, several other bills

that would have strengthened Care 4 Kids failed to pass. The bills would have:

- Increased reimbursement rates for child care providers to 75 percent of the market rate, as recommended by federal guidelines ([S.B. 931](#));
- Expanded family eligibility for Care 4 Kids to families making 75 percent of the state median income, as recommended by federal guidelines ([S.B. 933](#)); and
- Made parents pursuing education beyond high school eligible to receive Care 4 Kids assistance ([S.B. 934](#)).

Limitations imposed by the state's spending cap combined with the fiscal notes associated with these bills made the passage of the bills a Herculean task. Neither of the bills attempting to expand Care 4 Kids eligibility received a vote in the Appropriations Committee. The bill supporting increasing Care 4 Kids provider rates to 75 percent of the market rate was amended to remove the language stipulating the rate increase and instead specifying when additional funding must be used to raise the salaries of early childhood educators. Connecticut Voices will continue to advocate for increased provider reimbursement rates and expanded eligibility for Care 4 Kids in the 2020 legislative session.



### *Supporting early childhood educators*

Connecticut Voices testified on two bills designed to improve the financial situation of early childhood

educators. One bill that failed to pass, [S.B. 935](#), would have allowed early childhood educators to receive grants to offset the cost of their student loans. This bill would have helped more early childhood teachers obtain a bachelor's degree and would have eased the financial burden higher education imposes on an underpaid workforce. Failing to pass a loan forgiveness plan limits a child care provider's ability to attract highly qualified candidates to early education positions.

Connecticut Voices supported [P.A. 19-61](#), which will require the Office of Early Childhood to create guidelines for early childhood educator wages that consider level of education, specialized training, experience, and cost of living. Establishing the guidelines for early childhood educator compensation is an important step in future advocacy for early childhood educators to receive adequate payment.

### *Key legislative successes:*

- Modest budget increase for Care 4 Kids.
- Required the Office of Early Childhood to establish guidelines for early childhood educator wages.

## *K-12 Education*

Connecticut Voices for Children advocates for education policies that will help children with diverse identities achieve their full potential. We support policies that help children learn as they grow and graduate high school ready for college and career. This legislative session, the General Assembly provided funding to support youth struggling in schools and passed legislation to create curriculum honoring Black and Latino histories and cultures. Additionally, policymakers chose not to pass legislation that would have reduced access to data on disparities in outcomes for children of color and increased the presence of armed security guards in schools.

### *Education funding adjustments*

Despite the legislature building a budget under a tight spending cap, attempts to cut small programs that

provide services to at-risk youth and families in the cities did not (for the most part) come to fruition. The budget also increased Education Cost Sharing funding by 1.9 percent in FY 2020 and by 3.8 percent in FY 2021, so school budgets will at least be able to keep up with inflation.

### *Honoring and supporting students of color*

Connecticut Voices celebrates the passage of [P.A. 19-12](#), which requires Connecticut schools to include Black and Latino studies in the public school curriculum. By the 2022-23 school year, all high schools in Connecticut must offer a state-developed and approved Black and Latino studies course. The bill includes funding to train educators teaching this course, which is critical to ensuring that teachers can sensitively navigate conversations about experiences of personal and systemic racism. As Connecticut is able to train more teachers, it will be important to ensure that all students receive this educational opportunity. We thank the courageous, tireless youth-led organizations that championed this bill including Students for Educational Justice, CT Students for a Dream, and Citywide Youth Coalition.

### *Protect access to data on disparities*

As public schools continue to operate with fewer resources and growing populations of children of color and children with high levels of need, Connecticut Voices for Children is committed to protecting access to data that helps to target resources to children who are most in need. One of our major areas of focus this session was the defeat of [S.B. 851](#), which would have prohibited the state from disaggregating student data by ethnic subgroups. Looking at student access and outcomes data broken up by student ethnicity can help illuminate where some students face different opportunities than other students. We are appreciative of our many partners who voiced opposition to this bill through public testimony and sign-on letters.

We also celebrate the defeat of [S.B. 1023](#), which would have rolled back past work to ensure educational

opportunities for expelled students; [H.B. 7110](#), which would have allowed teachers to respond to undesirable student behaviors with unmonitored removal of students from the classroom; and [H.B. 7356](#), which would have allowed school districts to use school security infrastructure grants to hire armed security guards and create a taskforce with limited membership to study issues related to armed security guards. We thank our partners for their efforts defeating these bills, including African Caribbean American Parents of Children with Disabilities, the Alliance for Children's Mental Health, Legal Services, Office of the Child Advocate, the Juvenile Justice Alliance and many others.

### *Improving school stability for homeless youth*

Connecticut Voices testified in favor of [P.A. 19-179](#), legislation bringing Connecticut's state law in line with federal mandates within the McKinney-Vento Act. The act will allow youth experiencing homelessness to remain in school if their family must move across districts to receive shelter, and it establishes procedures that make it easier for families experiencing homelessness to work with districts as they enroll in school and request transportation. The Partnership for Strong Communities and Reaching Home Coalition, of which we are a member, championed this bill.

### *Key legislative successes:*

- Increased education funding, with few cuts to specialized programs that improve opportunities for children and families in cities.
- Creation of Black and Latino studies within the public school curriculum.
- Improved school stability for homeless youth.
- Defeated bills that would have prohibited disaggregation of student data by ethnicity, impacted efforts to ensure educational opportunities for expelled students, increased removal of students from the classroom, increased armed security guards in schools.

## Conclusion

During this legislative session, policymakers took important steps to improve the economic security of Connecticut families through several legislative measures, including implementing Paid Family and Medical Leave, increasing the minimum wage, restoring HUSKY income eligibility for parents, and increasing reimbursement rates for child care providers. While Connecticut Voices for Children celebrates these and other notable policy changes, we still have much work to do to ensure that every child grows up safe, healthy, and with a high-quality education. Due to the tight fiscal restrictions passed in 2017, the General Assembly did not pass a number of important bills to create a higher quality, more accessible, more stable early childhood education system—among other important priorities. Additionally, while the budget included a few sources of much-needed revenue, lawmakers did not make structural changes necessary to move Connecticut’s tax system toward sustainability and equity. And even with an increased minimum wage, too many low-wage Connecticut families will continue to struggle to make ends meet and cover their basic needs. Connecticut Voices for Children will continue our advocacy to encourage investments in Connecticut’s most precious resource—its children. This session’s successes are proof that with hard work, passion, and collaboration, we can move closer to making Connecticut a state where every child and family thrives.

