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OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD



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**Testimony of Beth Bye, Commissioner
Office of Early Childhood
Before the Education Committee
H.B. 6879 – An Act Concerning Teacher Certification
H.B. 6884 – An Act Concerning the Recruitment, Retention and
Enhancement of the Teaching Profession
March 15, 2023**

Greetings, Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and distinguished members of the Education Committee. I am Beth Bye, Commissioner of the Office of Early Childhood (OEC). I am here today to testify concerning **H.B. 6879 – An Act Concerning Teacher Certification** and **H.B. 6884 – An Act Concerning the Recruitment, Retention and Enhancement of the Teaching Profession**.

While we understand the workforce challenges for public schools, along with the issues raised by the current situation in which some elementary educators are certified for grades K-6 and some are only certified for Grades 1-6, we have significant concerns about unintended consequences of Section 1 of H.B. 6879 changing the Grade 1-6 certification, by adding Kindergarten.

Kindergarten is an important grade for children developmentally and where it is often the first introduction to public school. Our higher education institutions that offer early childhood teacher preparation focus their programming specifically on the early childhood years, on special education intervention, and on working with families. These are three very important areas of focus for teachers of our youngest children. They influence brain development, are trained to screen and identify early intervention needs, and partner with families to develop a trajectory of success with their child.

When the legislature last moved Kindergarten to elementary certification, multiple colleges closed their early childhood programs, and they have never reopened – thus adding to the pipeline problems in early childhood education programs and for public school preschool and kindergarten programs. If Kindergarten is to be moved again, we want to avoid a repeat of this in order to ensure that efforts to enhance and retain Connecticut's early childhood education workforce are not undermined.

To ameliorate these unintended consequences, OEC and SDE are currently working together on an early childhood endorsement that can be added to an elementary certificate for teachers with

elementary certification. OEC and SDE have also agreed to a waiver for the 2023-24 school year, allowing teachers certified in grades one through six to also teach kindergarten while this endorsement is in development. This is in response to the challenges districts are having with recruiting certified early childhood teachers.

Additionally, there are efforts underway to review current early childhood certificates and propose new early childhood licenses or credentials that cross the child care sector and the public schools. The early childhood taskforce, as required by P.A. 21-171, has submitted a report to the Education Committee outlining the request for the State Department of Education to work with OEC on developing a new license/credential that makes sense for the sectors and the needs of children. We ask that the Committee accept the taskforce request and allow this important work to occur before any decisions are made regarding where kindergarten belongs.

We oppose Section 10 of P.A. 6884 - An Act Concerning the Recruitment, Retention and Enhancement of the Teaching Profession. Section 10 would change the kindergarten entry age of 5 from December to September. We will not oppose this when CT has preschool for all and thousands of children will not be left out of school for a full year because of a date on the calendar. Any potential changes to the kindergarten entry date require careful planning and consideration due to the significant impact such a change would have on families, public school enrollment, and the early care and education system.

The proposed change to the entry date would result in approximately 11,500 fewer children entering kindergarten during the 2024-2025 school year.* The children first impacted by this proposed legislation are already 3 years old and many are currently enrolled in preschool. Delaying these children's entry to kindergarten would cause a significant financial burden for families who would need to pay for an unanticipated additional year of preschool. And for 25% of the families who cannot afford preschool, their children would go a full additional year without any formal education setting if this change occurs.

These changes will disproportionately impact Connecticut's more vulnerable families. Data from the 2015 OEC report to the legislature on changing the kindergarten entry date indicates that families in lower-income areas tend to send their children to kindergarten when they are age eligible, while families in higher-income areas are more likely to delay their children's entry to kindergarten (often referred to as "red-shirting"). In addition to the direct cost of an additional year of care, delaying children's entry to kindergarten can impact parent/caregiver re-entry to the workforce and/or their pursuit of educational opportunities.

One irony here is that in Connecticut, where many families do have means and try to give their children a running start, many do keep their children out of kindergarten an extra year. So often, the complaint of kindergarten teachers is: "We are dealing with 4-year-olds and 6.5-year-olds" – as an argument to change the date - to be more in line with when wealthier families choose to

send their children to kindergarten. The children and families who will be disadvantaged by this change educationally and economically already have fewer resources.

Child care and preschool programs would also be impacted by this potential change. Providing an additional year of preschool to children anticipated to transition to kindergarten for the 2024-2025 school year would require changes to overall enrollment patterns, classroom make-up, transition practices, and curriculum. Families with children ready to begin preschool will be faced with fewer available spaces due to the additional students, potentially disrupting continuity of care for children already in child care and impacting the availability of state, federal and locally funded preschool for 3-year-olds. For the early care and education system at large, this potential influx of additional children would place strains on a system already reeling from the impact of the pandemic and subsequent staffing shortages.

Considerations that might address some of the concerns associated with the current kindergarten entry cutoff date include:

- Phasing in a change in entry date over a period of years to plan for and more easily absorb the impact on schools, families, and the early care and education system.
- Eliminating the option to not send children to kindergarten when they are age eligible, except under extenuating circumstances. This would ensure that students would span 1 year of age/development in each kindergarten cohort and would address some of the current disparities in kindergarten entry practices.
- In the longer term, implementing universal preschool or expanding funding for state-funded preschool prior to, or in conjunction with, a change in kindergarten entry age – efforts that require bringing our federal partners into the conversation.

** EdSight, Connecticut's official source for education data, shows 2022-2023 kindergarten enrollment at 34,821 students. The proposed change would impact children turning 5 between September 2 and January 1 of any school year, or approximately 1/3 of the 34,821 total enrolled (approximately 11,500 children).*

We have comments about Section 11 of H.B. 6884. The OEC promotes the use of play-based learning as a developmentally appropriate and effective practice in preschool programs, including both child care centers and public school settings receiving state funding for preschool. Programs funded by OEC to provide preschool through School Readiness, Child Day Care Contracts, or the Smart Start grant must be Head Start approved or must achieve National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation within three years of receiving funding. Play-based learning is reflected in both the NAEYC program accreditation standards and the Head Start Performance Standards as a primary approach to promote young children's learning.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to answer your questions now and/or at a later date. The OEC is committed to work together—with legislators, the executive branch, providers, advocates, and parents—to better serve our families with young children.

About the OEC

The Connecticut Office of Early Childhood (OEC) advances a two-generation family-centered approach in our pursuit of optimal health, safety and learning outcomes for young children. Through our core programs, we support infant and toddler care, preschool, after-school care, child care and youth camp licensing, home visiting, and early intervention to address developmental delays. The OEC is working toward better coordinated, cost-effective services that support Connecticut's youngest children and families.