

**Testimony of Beth Bye, Commissioner, Office of Early Childhood  
Before the Committee on Children**

**S.B. 6 – An Act Concerning Resources and Supports for Infants, Toddlers and Disconnected Youth**

**H.B. 5003 - An Act Concerning the Early Childhood Care and Education Fund**

**Tuesday, March 4, 2025**

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Good afternoon, Senator Maher, Representative Paris, Senator Martin, Representative Dauphinais and distinguished members of the Committee on Children. I am Beth Bye, Commissioner of the Office of Early Childhood (OEC). I am testifying concerning **S.B. 6 – An Act Concerning Resources and Supports for Infants, Toddlers and Disconnected Youth** and **H.B. 5003 – An Act Concerning the Early Childhood Care and Education Fund**.

I will first address several sections of **S.B. 6 – An Act Concerning Resources and Supports for Infants, Toddlers and Disconnected Youth**.

**Section 1** transfers the administration and oversight of the federal Child and Adult Food Program (CACFP) from the State Department of Education to the OEC. CACFP, a federal program through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), provides nutritious meals and snacks to infants and children in child care centers, group child care homes, family day care homes, and emergency shelters, and snacks and suppers to children participating in eligible at-risk afterschool care programs. The CACFP also provides meals and snacks to adults who receive care in nonresidential adult day care centers.

SDE is the administrator of this program along with other child nutrition programs such as Summer Food Service Program and school nutrition programs that include the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Afterschool Snack Program, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, Special Milk Program, and Seamless Summer Option. The agency has broad experience and expertise in administering child nutrition programs. We believe strongly that the CACFP should remain in the administration and oversight of SDE.

**Section 4** defines “kindergarten preparatory academy” as a kindergarten preparation program established by a local or regional board of education that enrolls students who turn five years of age on or after September 1 of the school year and who are not eligible to enter kindergarten. The kindergarten preparatory academy is designed to provide a bridge classroom from a preschool program to a kindergarten program in the public school.

The Blue Ribbon Panel Plan and the Governor’s early childhood proposal are designed to de-complicate the current early childhood system and give communities the planning supports they need to develop programming that serve children and families before kindergarten in their community. The sudden change in the kindergarten entry age did create disruption in the impacted cohorts entering kindergarten. The early childhood system is adapting and with the Universal Preschool Endowment, OEC can serve

children who are late 4s and young 5s without requiring a whole new system within SDE or OEC. We also believe that individual communities may be able to use OEC-funded Early Start CT and Smart Start funds for programs like the Kindergarten Academy in Middletown if that fits their community need. This does not require a new state structure with new rules and guidance and funding streams.

There is also a line of educational research in early childhood that speaks to the benefits of a mixed age group preschool model for children's optimal development:

<https://bingschool.stanford.edu/news/support-mixed-age-groupings-optimal-model-early-childhood-classrooms>. Creating a statewide structure that relies on classes specifically for one age group may limit options for communities that prioritize this approach.

Children not entering kindergarten are preschoolers. The role of preschool teachers is to teach to the developmental level of the children before them. As the kindergarten eligible age shifts, as it just has in Connecticut, the curriculum will shift as well. Lessons learned in California about "transitional kindergarten" serves as notice to other states to be careful about adding structural complexity to the system – as the system is already complex, and it risks furthering inequities in a bifurcated system.

<https://www.nasbe.org/californias-transitional-kindergarten-lessons-learned/>

**Section 5** adds establishment of expansion of a kindergarten preparatory academy to the OEC Smart Start statute, Sec. 10-506. We are unclear if the preschool preparatory academy falling under the OEC-operated Smart Start program would be obligated to adhere to the guidance put forth by SDE. The current structure of Smart Start allows those funds to be used for a classroom for late 4- and 5-year-olds, regardless of what the district calls it. We stress again, that such a program can fit under the current structure in Connecticut.

**Section 6** eliminates the OEC licensing exemption for municipal youth camps with the intent to protect the health and safety of children. OEC holds that all children deserve to be cared for in environments where their health and safety. These regulations include such provisions as requiring criminal background checks, health and safety training, medication administration training, reporting of injury of a child, and requiring any staff more than 21 years of age to be mandated reporters.

There is a significant OEC staff fiscal impact to bring all license-exempt municipal youth camps under the licensure of OEC. OEC currently licenses 500 youth camps annually. We do not have data about the number of municipal youth camps operating across the state, but we do know this number to be significant and would greatly increase the number of needed OEC licensing staff. This would require a direct appropriation for staffing that is not in the Governor's Recommended Budget.

**Section 8** adds the executive director of the Connecticut Library Consortium as a member of the Early Childhood Cabinet. The OEC supports new members, with the relevant expertise, who can provide informed voice concerning early childhood issues.

**Section 9** requires OEC to update the one-page development milestone document to include information concerning the Help Me Grow program and activities. OEC can update this document to include the

prescribed information. However, concerning subsection (D), the office would like to note that the agency only has jurisdiction over special education services for children through age three, yet there is no mention of SDE in this section. SDE is a key partner in implementing special education services for young children in Connecticut, and OEC and SDE work closely throughout the transition process. Additionally, the bill references screening and evaluations for children ages birth through five years. The OEC does not have jurisdiction for children over age three regarding evaluations for special education services.

**Section 10** requires OEC to conduct a quarterly review of children deemed ineligible for Birth to Three and the reasons for such ineligibility. This would require additional OEC staffing and a significant effort from the agency to implement additional data tracking, the funding for which is not included in the Governor's budget. OEC has concerns related to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), and data sharing requirements. Birth to Three follows strict privacy protections of Personally Identifiable Information (PII) for children who are referred, evaluated, and supported through the Birth to Three data system. Sharing data of ineligible children breaches those protections. When children are determined ineligible for the Birth to Three system, the Birth to Three providers already share community resources with families. This includes a form that connects families to Sparkler and Help Me Grow, which houses developmental monitoring for children.

**Section 11** requires the OEC to provide, through the Help Me Grow program, training and other social, emotional and workforce support to teenage parents in communities with teen birth rates greater than 10 percent. OEC currently provides such training and supports under the Help Me Grow program.

**Section 12** requires OEC to develop a report about the utilization of the Sparkler mobile application, which provides parents and guardians for children ages birth to five years old with developmental screening and linkages to existing supports and resources.

Sparkler is a tool that is able to provide data about many metrics; however, the tool is not the appropriate vehicle to measure some of the metrics outlined in the bill. For example, Sparkler cannot measure how much families are learning. Some metrics could be measured but with significant research and evaluation support and additional fiscal cost which is not included in the Governor's budget.

Sparkler currently tracks the following metrics.

- How many programs, and what types of programs (home visiting, early care and education programs, family child care, community-based organizations, etc.), are using Sparkler's dashboard system to support and engage families.
- How many parents/caregivers and children are using Sparkler's mobile applications (for iOS and Android).

- How are families spending their time when using the Sparkler app (for example, how much time are families spending on the following functions within the app: coaching, screening, parent tips, play, and within play, how many activities families are doing within each domain.)
- How many plays are completed per domain (heart, words, mind, body) and how many families are browsing play activities and parenting tips within the app.
- How many messages are sent from providers via Sparkler to families and how many messages are sent from families to providers via Sparkler.
- The geographic distribution of programs and families using Sparkler and completing screenings.
- The age and gender distribution of children using Sparkler and completing screenings.
- Number of screenings completed, scores of screenings (on track, monitor, refer in each domain), and follow-up recommendations on screenings.
- How are results being provided to parents and guardians.

The OEC appreciates the intent of **H.B. 5003 – An Act Concerning the Early Childhood Care and Education Fund**.

**Sections 1 and 2** of this bill invests \$100 million in state General Fund resources in FY26 and FY27 into the Early Childhood Care and Education Fund and allows for up to 90 percent of the Fund to be expended each fiscal year. The Fund can be used to expand the Care 4 Kids program, salary increases for early childhood educators, subsidies for health care plans, and grants for capital expenses for construction and renovation of child care facilities.

OEC shares many of the same goals that this bill is seeking to reach, with a different approach. The approach to this Fund under H.B. 5003 expends 90 percent of state funds each year, leaving only 10 percent in the Fund each year - with no guarantee that additional state funds will be available to put into the Fund in future years. By expending 90 percent upfront, this structure could create a fiscal hole in future years, which could destabilize the early care and education field.

House Bill 6867 is the Governor's Universal Preschool Endowment fund proposal that aims to provide a long-term, stable investment in early care and education to ensure that children and families have access to affordable preschool for years to come. It is a prudent and smart strategy to invest a portion of funds now with the long view to build up and sustain funds for the future. The Governor's Universal Preschool Endowment Fund, based on the Blue Ribbon Panel plan, is the vehicle OEC believes will strengthen Connecticut's early care and education system, make it more accessible and affordable for families, and provide more preschool opportunities for our children. Specifically, OEC believes a missing piece in H.B. 5003 is to allocate funding to the Early Start CT program and expand state-funded child care spaces based on a local needs assessment. These contracted spaces are more stabilizing for community-based programs and family child care homes than only funding the Care 4 Kids program.

**Section 3** requires the OEC to develop a report on the cost to increase Care 4 Kids provider rates to cover the cost of care as described in the OEC Narrow Cost Analysis. The report must include a plan and timeline to increase Care 4 Kids provider rates over a five-year period. First, the September 1, 2025, requirement to complete the report is very challenging with such a short reporting timeframe. Second, this only addresses the Care 4 Kids program payment rates and is contrary to the Blue Ribbon Panel report that considers the early care and education system in a wholistic manner.

**Section 6** increases the income eligibility for Care 4 Kids from 60% to 85% of the state median income (SMI) at application and increases the graduated phase out level from 85% to 100% of SMI. The federal CCDF funds may only be used for up to 85% of SMI; therefore, state funds must pick up the cost of families enrolled between 85% and 100% of SMI. These funds are not included in the Governor's budget. Currently, Care 4 Kids has a wait list. Expanding eligibility at a rate of this magnitude will increase the Care 4 Kids wait list, leaving more families without affordable care.

**Section 8 – 10** creates a competitive five-year \$100 million grant funding by bond funds to support capital expenses for the construction and renovation of child care facilities. Capital grants for are included in the Governor's Universal Preschool Endowment plan as the data indicates a great need for facilities improvements. In addition, OEC currently has \$10 million in bond funds for child care facilities. Based on the number of applications in the first round of ARPA-funded facilities grant applications in Fall of 2023 and the anticipated need for 20,000 additional seats by 2032 in the Governor's Universal Preschool Endowment plan, OEC acknowledges there is a need for facilities funding as well as technical assistance to help providers plan and execute a construction project.

**Section 11** requires OEC to implement presumptive eligibility for the Care 4 Kids program. Presumptive eligibility is encouraged, not required, by the federal government. It is an aspiration of OEC to institute presumptive eligibility, but Care 4 Kids currently has a wait list that places new applicants, who do not fall into a priority category, on the wait list. Presumptive eligibility would result in many, many more families becoming eligible, greatly expanding the wait list.

**Section 12** requires the OEC to implement a prospective payment system for the Care 4 Kids program. This is a federal requirement and the OEC is working on implementation of prospective payments during an approved waiver period that extends to August of 2026.

Finally, I will address two studies and a report required in this bill.

**Section 16** requires the OEC, in collaboration with the Department of Insurance and the Attorney General, to conduct a joint study regarding an assessment of the factors that have given rise to increasing liability insurance costs for child care owners. OEC is highly aware of this serious situation where child care providers are experiencing significant rate increases, being bumped into higher cost products with

higher deductibles, or cancelation of their insurance by the insurance company. In response, the OEC has met several times with the Department of Insurance to discuss the issue and we are now developing a survey that will be distributed to all licensed child care businesses. We are also working with the Women's Business Development Council (WBDC), which has expertise in child care provider business operations and provides technical assistance and OEC-funded grants to the field.

**Section 17** requires the OEC to conduct a study concerning the prevalence of men in the child care and early childhood education workforce. Data clearly shows a dearth of men working in the field, which is dominated by women, particularly women of color. The January 1, 2026, report deadline is challenging given the short timeframe to complete such a study.

**Section 18** requires the OEC, in consultation with the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection (DESPP), to develop a report on background checks for early childhood staff. The report must be submitted by January 1, 2026, to the Committee on Children, Education Committee and Public Safety and Security Committee.

The OEC has worked diligently over the past few years to improve the background check process with a focus on quicker processing and improving efficiency. We have made significant strides with the implementation of the in-house Background Check Information System (BCIS). OEC has built a small, but dedicated staff unit within our legal division to exclusively work on background checks. OEC has collaborated over the years with DESPP to improve the fingerprinting process.

Despite concerns and comments expressed about the details and approach in this bill, OEC believes that, working together over the session, we can make significant progress toward the goals of the proposals of the Governor, Committee on Children and Education Committee Chairs, and House and Senate leadership.

Thank you for your time and attention. The OEC is committed to working together with legislators, the executive branch, providers, advocates, and parents—to better serve our families with young children.

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*The Connecticut Office of Early Childhood 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. OEC is working toward better-coordinated, cost-effective services that support Connecticut's youngest children and families.*