



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD



Connecticut Office of
Early Childhood

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Testimony of Myra Jones-Taylor, Ph.D., Commissioner
Office of Early Childhood
Before the Education Committee
S.B. 1101 – An Act Concerning the Office of Early Childhood
S.B. 7020 – An Act Concerning Early Childhood Educators and Initiatives
Thursday, March 19, 2015

Good morning Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, and distinguished members of the Education Committee. I am Myra Jones-Taylor, Commissioner of the Office of Early Childhood. I am here today to testify on two bills before this committee:

- **S.B. 1101 – An Act Concerning the Office of Early Childhood**
- **S.B. 7020 – An Act Concerning Early Childhood Educators and Initiatives**

The Office of Early Childhood supports S.B. 1101, which makes numerous changes to early childhood statutes. My written testimony details the changes that are part of this bill. Today, I will highlight a few of them.

Five sections of the bill modify statutes pertaining to the School Readiness preschool program.

Section 1 removes the residency requirement for School Readiness programs in the 19 Priority School Districts. We urge the Committee to propose substitute language that would also remove the residency requirement for the 49 School Readiness programs in Competitive School Districts. This was a technical oversight in the drafting of the bill before you today.

The existing residency language only allows residents in the community in which the program is funded to attend School Readiness preschool. This residency requirement is impeding our efforts to fill all School Readiness slots and ensure that as many low-income children as possible are enrolled in high-quality preschool. Removing the residency language would open up this high-quality preschool program to children living in other communities who otherwise would not have access to a preschool experience. The OEC will develop a formal policy that requires School Readiness programs to give first priority to the children living in the community. Only after that is achieved would the program be allowed to open any remaining slots to children living in another community. This policy change would move the state closer to the goal for universal access to preschool.

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Section 2 would allow School Readiness programs in Competitive School Municipalities to receive less than the allowable \$107,000 annual grant. Grantees apply for the number of school readiness spaces based on the amount per space type, Full-Day, School Day or Part-Day.

Section 3 increases scholarship funding from up to \$500,000 to up to \$1 million, contingent upon availability, and increases the maximum scholarship per student from \$5,000 to \$10,000. These two changes will better support teachers working toward a bachelor's degree in an approved field of study.

Section 5 removes the requirement to complete a Priority School District School Readiness unmet need report on a biennial basis. The OEC is developing a plan to achieve universal access to preschool for low-income eligible children on a state-wide basis. As part of that plan, the OEC will build on the unmet study conducted for the agency by the Connecticut Health and Financing Authority (CHEFA). A requirement to also complete an unmet need for a smaller set of communities is duplicative work. Section 9 would eliminate the requirement for the OEC to submit the unmet report.

S.B. 1101 makes two changes to the Care4Kids statute. **Section 6** eliminates the reference to an 8-month redetermination. The OEC will develop administrative policy that sets redetermination at 12 months, which promotes continuity of care for the child. This policy shift is in alignment with the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) reauthorization that requires states to set redetermination at 12 months. This section of the bill also removes a requirement to provide written notices to Care4Kids recipients and providers in the event of changes to the Care4Kids program. Notification of changes will be provided on the website, phone, and by email. This will result in a cost-saving of \$15,000 for each mailing.

S.B. 1101 makes technical changes to the Smart Start program by creating two separate fiscal accounts, one for operating costs and one for bonding. The bill also clarifies that the OEC provides Smart Start grants upfront to grantees; the OEC does not reimburse grantees under Smart Start. These changes are found in **Sections 10, 11 and 12** of the bill.

In **Section 13**, membership is expanded under the Early Childhood Cabinet. Several of the positions are required as part of the OEC receiving the Federal Preschool Development Grant.

Section 15 clarifies that the Commissioner – not the executive director – of the Office of Early Childhood is the authority of the Nurturing Families Network. It also reduces reporting requirements from twice to once annually, which is cost-effective.

Section 28 repeals the statutes establishing the Children's Trust Fund. The programs of the Children's Trust Fund now fall under the Family Support Services Division within the OEC.

Section 24 clarifies that the state-funded Even Start program falls under the OEC.

Finally, the bill makes several technical changes to the child care and youth camp licensing statutes.

Sections 7 and 22 remove the word “day” and instead refer to “child” care. This terminology aligns with a national trend to focus on the child.

Sections 7 and 8 allow the Commissioner of the OEC the discretion to waive certain regulations in the event of a declaration of an emergency. For example, the Commissioner could waive staffing ratios in the event a staff member is unable to get to the center of group child care home due to natural disaster. The intent is to keep the early child care setting open so that children have access to child care services.

Section 8 and 23 allows the OEC Commissioner the discretion renew a license that has expired within 30 days of the expiration once the OEC has received an application and licensure fee. This allows a provider to quickly renew their license without undergoing the full licensing application and resume operation so child care services for families and children are not unduly disrupted. It is important to note that during the time between expiration and renewal, the provider cannot legally operate the program.

Sections 16, 17, and 18 clarifies that a voluntary surrender of a family child care home, group child care home, child care center and youth camp licenses is recognized as disciplinary action.

Sections 19, 20 and 21 clarify the OEC commissioner’s authority to pursue disciplinary action after a license expires. This allows the Commissioner to consider a license or approval valid for purposes of disciplinary action, should a license or approval expire within 18 months of commencement of an investigation or disciplinary action. By allowing this, serious violations and subsequent discipline can be documented even when the license has expired.

I will now turn to **H.B. 7020 – An Act Concerning Early Childhood Educators and Initiatives**.

Section 1 of this bill would clarify that the State Department of Education (SDE) will administer a revised state-wide Kindergarten Entrance Inventory. Currently, a Kindergarten Entrance Inventory (KEI), intended to assess a child’s preparedness for kindergarten, is available to public school teachers. The OEC and SDE acknowledge the limitations of the existing KEI.

The OEC is part of a seven-state consortia working collaboratively to develop a state-of-the-art KEI. This revised tool will support teachers in their work with kindergarten students, who enter the classroom at different levels of school preparedness. Much work has been completed with a roll-out planned over the course of the next 18 months. Planning and public outreach will take place before a pilot is launched followed by full implementation. The OEC is working collaboratively with the State Department of Education on this project.

Implementing the revised KEI has fiscal implications. We are seeking different avenues to cover the start-up costs of the revised KEI.

Section 5 requires the OEC to collect information about course work from certain early childhood degree programs from higher education institutions that have not been approved by the Board of Regents for Higher Education or Office of Higher Education and the Office of Early Childhood. Information would be collected from a college when a newly hired early childhood head teacher, who graduated from that college, is going through the Individual Review Route Early Childhood Teacher Credential process. The OEC would use this information to conduct a trend analysis of each unapproved institution to determine if the course work of the early childhood degree program aligns with teacher preparation standards of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and meets Connecticut's existing teacher preparation standards.

The goal is to ensure that all state-funded early childhood head teachers are adequately prepared to effectively support the socio-emotional and development learning of young children. The OEC supports this proposed provision.

Section 7 requires the OEC to collaborate and fund local and regional early childhood councils. The State of Connecticut has a history of supporting and working collaboratively with these early childhood councils, which have created early childhood blueprint reports and are in varying stages of implementing those plans. The early childhood councils have been supported through a public-private partnership between the OEC, Graustein Memorial Fund, and the Children's Fund of Connecticut. Local early childhood councils increasingly are also securing additional funds from other philanthropic entities and local support. Given the state's budget challenges, the Governor's budget does not provide funding in the coming biennium for the early childhood councils.

Section 8 of this bill requires the OEC to develop an early childhood workforce plan to assist state-funded programs. The plan would address supporting programs to meet staff qualifications, compensating teachers who meet staff qualifications, and teacher retention strategies. The OEC is committed to support early childhood teachers as they work toward an associate's and bachelor's degree. The OEC distributed over \$900,000 in FY14 in teacher scholarships to support teachers in meeting staff qualifications. In SB 1101, the OEC proposes increasing the use of unexpended School Readiness funds from \$500,000 to \$1 million and increasing the per teacher scholarship from \$5,000 to \$10,000.

The OEC is concerned about the short deadline to submit a report by January 1, 2016. The OEC respectfully requests extending this deadline to September 1, 2017 to enable the agency to produce a well-researched and meaningful report to the General Assembly.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and I would be happy to take any questions.