



State of Connecticut

Office of Early Childhood



Office of Early Childhood
Testimony before the Education Committee
S.B. 25 – An Act Establishing the Office of Early Childhood
S.B. 26 – An Act Expanding Opportunities for Early Childhood Education
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Good morning, Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischman, ranking members Senator Boucher and Representative Ackert, and members of the Education Committee. I am Myra Jones-Taylor, Executive Director of the Office of Early Childhood (OEC). Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to address two bills before you today:

- **S.B. 25 – An Act Establishing the Office of Early Childhood**
- **S.B. 26 – An Act Expanding Opportunities for Early Childhood Education**

To summarize the two proposed bills:

S.B. 25 would statutorily establish the Office of Early Childhood, moving early childhood programs spread across four state agencies into one agency.

S.B. 26 would create a pathway for Connecticut to expand School Readiness opportunities for young children, direct the Office of Early Childhood to develop a plan to achieve universal access to preschool, and increase quality in our child care licensing system.

Over the years, Connecticut has made significant investments in early childhood programs and has created several nationally recognized programs. But until now, the state has not been able to create the truly integrated, comprehensive early childhood system we need to ensure that all children in Connecticut reach their utmost potential, by providing children and their families with a coordinated system of early childhood services and supports. In addition, an integrated and comprehensive early childhood system would allow us to reach larger numbers of low-income, high-needs young children. Without this system, too many of our most vulnerable young children are not prepared to succeed in school and start off in life well behind their wealthier peers, a problem demonstrated in part by the state having one of the largest academic achievement gaps in the nation.

However, through our investments over the last decade, particularly over the last few years, Connecticut has laid a solid foundation to reverse this pattern through efforts to expand our

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capacity to provide high-quality early learning and development services and, at the same time, increase the number of low-income, high-needs children enrolled in these programs.

These efforts include the establishment of the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) by Governor Dannel Malloy through Executive Order #35 on June 24, 2013. This agency, overseeing a coordinated system of early childhood care, education and support, is currently comprised of:

- School Readiness, Child Day Care, state-funded Head Start, Even Start, Head Start Collaboration Office (formerly in the State Department of Education)
- The Children's Trust Fund (formerly in the Department of Social Services)
- Charts-a-Course (formerly in the Board of Regents)

As of July 1, 2014, the following programs will be integrated into the Office of Early Childhood:

- Care 4 Kids, Child Care and Development Fund (from the Department of Social Services)
- Child Day Care and Youth Camp Licensing (from the Department of Public Health)
- Pre-K Special Education (from the Department of Education)¹

As of October 1, 2014, The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Grant will move into the Office of Early Childhood from the Department of Public Health.

An independent Birth to Three study, evaluating the feasibility of moving the program to the Office of Early Childhood, has been completed and submitted to the Governor and co-chairs of the Appropriations Committee for review.

S.B. 25 – An Act Establishing the Office of Early Childhood

S.B. 25 would codify the Office of Early Childhood and lay out in detail the charge of the Office to ensure that young children are ready for school and lifelong success. The centralized accountability of the Office allows for a concerted focus on children from birth through age five through unified services, policy, budget, data, and outcome measurement. This governance structure allows Connecticut to implement its bold early childhood reform by accomplishing the following:

1. Improved outcomes for young children through better access and unified quality
2. Streamlined information for parents
3. Coordination across programs and services
4. Alignment of efforts to promote all aspects of child development
5. Efficiencies to avoid duplication and provide better value
6. Accountability for results and the quality and equitable distribution of programs

¹ Only the discretionary funds from IDEA Part B-619 (Early Childhood Special Education) will be transferred to OEC in order to ensure that the special education needs of young children are fully integrated throughout OEC's work. The portion that currently goes to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) will remain at the State Department of Education (SDE).

Though new, the Office of Early Childhood has hit the ground running. We are designing a universal developmental screening system, working with a seven-state consortia to develop a Kindergarten Entry Age tool, training providers on more effective learning standards, creating a Pre-K to Grade 3 strategy, integrating data systems for better accountability and decision-making, providing funds to improve program facilities, and awarding scholarships to early childhood providers for continued education. And we are getting ready to launch several more. For reference, I've included our current list of priority initiatives as an addendum.

By codifying the Office of Early Childhood into statute, it will give the Office the necessary statutory authority over its various programs, allowing the Office to enforce its regulatory authority if necessary. It also allows the Office to apply for federal funding and other funding opportunities that only state agencies are currently able to apply for.

The move to establish the Office of Early Childhood is a bold move and a smart investment. Connecticut has joined the ranks of a handful of states – Massachusetts, Washington, and Georgia – that lead the national with building truly comprehensive systems. A unified vision system and vision for early childhood leads to better outcomes for children, improved communication with parents, higher standards for providers, and more effective decision-making for policy makers.

S.B. 26 – An Act Expanding Opportunities for Early Childhood Education

An estimated 4,000 low-income children live in our poorest communities and have no access to pre-kindergarten. The Governor has taken a bold step by calling for universal access to preschool in these districts for low-income children by 2019.

S.B. 26 makes statutory changes that will allow for expansion of early childhood opportunities for young children in Connecticut's Priority School Districts, Competitive School Districts and Alliance Districts. These changes include: 1) allowing Competitive School Districts with only one priority school (not two) to receive additional funding over the base funding, 2) allowing for an Alliance School District not in a Priority School District to receive School Readiness funding, and 3) removing the reimbursement cap for Priority and Competitive School Districts to allow for a 3 percent provider rate increase – a move toward higher quality.

The Governor's proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2015 provides \$11,511,904 for early learning opportunities for an additional 1,020 low-income children. The increased number of children served will be rolled out at the beginning of the 2015 academic year along with an increase in provider reimbursement rates and start-up funds to ensure programs are able to expand to meet the demand while continuing to provide high-quality care and education.

S.B. 26 also requires the Office of Early Childhood to develop and submit a plan to the Governor by January 1, 2015, to achieve universal access to pre-kindergarten within our state's poorest communities.

In addition, the bill makes statutory changes to require annual licensing inspections of licensed child care centers and licensed family child care homes. Currently, unannounced inspections of

licensed child day care centers and group day care homes are performed once every two years, and family day care homes every three years.

The move to annual inspections would be a significant step to address problems outlined in a number of recent independent reviews of Connecticut's child care licensing system. Reports from the Office of the Inspector General, Auditors of Public Accounts, National Association for Regulatory Administration, National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, and Child Health & Development Institute highlight problems that require attention to ensure the state's youngest children are safe in their child care settings.

For context, the National Association for Regulatory Administration, a national organization, recommends a caseload of 50-60 cases/licensed sites or fewer per licensing inspector. Connecticut's inspectors currently have caseloads averaging 185 for licensed centers and group homes and averaging 265 for licensed family child care homes, more than triple the recommended caseload.

Finally, S.B. 26 would transfer youth camp licensing statutes from the Department of Public Health to the Office of Early Childhood. This will allow both the Child Day Care and Youth Camp Licensing Programs to transfer to the Office of Early Childhood and give the Office statutory authority over both programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My staff and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

ADDENDUM

Vision and Mission

Our mission and vision statements guide us as we integrate the work of these programs and build a coordinated system of care and support for young children and their families.

- **Our vision is that** all young children in Connecticut are safe, healthy, learning and thriving. Each child is surrounded by a strong network of nurturing adults who deeply value the importance of the first years of a child's life and have the skills, support and passion to meet the unique needs of every child.
- **Our Mission is** to support all young children in their development by ensuring that early childhood policy, funding, and services strengthen the critical role families, providers, educators, and communities play in a child's life.

Our Guiding Principles

- Build family-centered and family-driven systems for *all* children in Connecticut
- Prioritize children facing barriers, risks, setbacks or challenges to their healthy development
- Foster a deep respect for cultural differences in child rearing practices
- Honor families' diverse languages, values, strengths and needs
- Consider the whole child, his or her family, and his or her community setting
- Value early childhood as a time of learning through play and building positive relationships
- Ensure equal access to and parent choice within all early childhood services
- Operate in an efficient, coordinated, caring, professional and effective manner
- Confront and eliminate institutional racism and disparities
- Engage in continuous and system quality improvement
- Utilize current best practices, available research and data
- Nurture and value collaborative partnerships, innovation and self-reflection

Priority Initiatives

The Office has undertaken significant work in the past seven months to improve Connecticut's early childhood system to ensure that families have access to the highest quality early childhood services, preparing children for success in school and in life. We have identified the following systems-building strategies and initiatives to be developed and implemented over the next 18 months:

- Quality Create a universal early screening and referral system that will lead to children being screened more regularly and earlier identification of those with needs, allowing for earlier intervention and improved outcomes.

- Build a centralized early childhood information system (ECIS) that will make it easier to manage and analyze data to better inform policy and practice.
- Develop a plan for a coordinated home visiting system.
- Develop and implement a plan to coordinate early childhood technical assistance statewide to increase the quality of programs and services offered to young children.
- Act on recommendations from reports and assessments to improve the children care and youth camp licensing system to keep children healthy and safe in early childhood settings.
- Create a seamless and coordinated Birth to Five early care and education system that increases access, information and quality.
- Launch a public information campaign targeted to families, providers, and communities on the importance that starting earlier is better, quality matters, and the linkages to resources for accessing early childhood programs, services and support.