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# STATE OF CONNECTICUT

## OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD



Connecticut Office of  
Early Childhood

David Wilkinson  
*Commissioner*

**Testimony of David Wilkinson, Commissioner  
Office of Early Childhood  
Before the Education Committee  
Re: HB 5449 – An Act Concerning the Alignment and Merging of Early Care  
and Education Program Funding Streams, Eligibility, Rates and Policies  
Wednesday, March 14, 2018**

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Good morning Senator Slossberg, Senator Boucher, Representative Fleischmann, Representative Lavielle and distinguished members of the Education Committee. I am David Wilkinson, Commissioner of the Office of Early Childhood. I am here today to testify on HB 5449 – An Act Concerning the Alignment and Merging of Early Care and Education Program Funding Streams, Eligibility, Rates and Policies.

The Connecticut Office of Early Childhood advances a family-centered and results-driven approach to support young children and their families. OEC integrates early childhood services by providing a unified vision and institutional structure to support increased coordination between programs. Through our core programs, we support access to high-quality early care and education, evidence-based home visiting services for at-risk young families, health and safety assurances, and early intervention and parenting supports to help families address developmental challenges.

The Office of Early Childhood sets forth a package of legislative changes that seeks to strengthen the agency's ability to deliver on its mandate to create a coordinated early care and education system, and more broadly, to achieve measurably better results for children and families. All of our proposals fall within the agency's existing appropriations. These proposed legislative adjustments build off and strengthen the original language of Public Act 14-39 – the act that established the Office of Early Childhood. These changes will improve the agency's ability to fulfill its mission and obligations as set forth by the legislature at its creation.

Most notably, with the legislative changes, the agency will be able to make meaningful progress on creating a stronger early care and education system, one that works better for young children, families and child care providers. These proposals will enable us to more effectively and responsibly address our significant deficiency in infant toddler care, better provide child care support for working families and those seeking to improve their financial stability through education and training, improve quality and safety of early care and education settings, and reduce unnecessary provider burden. The OEC recently conducted in-depth stakeholder engagement process which has confirmed these priorities for strengthening the early care and education system.

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Our top priority among these is improving access to care for infants and toddlers. It is the population for which there is the greatest unmet need and the most important time of life for provision of safe, stable, quality care. We know that 80% of a child's brain architecture is formed in the first three years of life, and that the conditions in which that occurs has life-long impacts. High-quality early care and education is a critical factor in a young child's healthy social emotional development.

The early months and years are a time when working parents are most in need of support and are least likely to get it. Without access to safe, licensed care, parents find themselves forced to choose unregulated, unlicensed and sometimes unsafe alternatives. Since I have become Commissioner, four children have died in child care, all of them in unlicensed care, all of them infants or toddlers. These tragic results can be prevented.

For these reasons and others, we will do all we can to responsibly increase family access to affordable infant and toddler care. I want to ensure we have as many tools as possible at our disposal to do so. The changes we propose, in combination with our existing authorities, will give us the tools we need to take action in a way that supports providers and avoids creating undue challenges.

Finally, one new provision will enable OEC to more broadly improve performance toward child and family outcomes through evaluation and innovation in a way that increases cost-effectiveness, savings, and value. OEC is called on to be data-driven, outcomes-focused, evidence-based and to continually monitor and improve early care and education and family support systems while increasing efficiency with better results. We are further mandated to advance a whole family focus to achieve better child outcomes by looking not just within but across systems.

Modest investments in evaluation can yield tremendous returns for children, families and taxpayers. Section 2 of this bill enables an investment of up to 2% of five agency line items to achieve these goals. This proposal would enable OEC to support providers in developing and testing promising intervention models, including cross-sector models for family success. Flexibility should come with accountability. For that reason, we propose this modest new authority come with strict reporting obligations and rigorous evaluation requirements.

Below is a summary of the specific proposals, which, in combination with existing authorities, will enable to achieve the priorities outlines above.

**Changes to section 1 underscore the importance of infant and toddler care.** It adds language to Sec. 10-500(b) to emphasize that the OEC is responsible for promoting the delivery of services to infants and toddlers to ensure the optimal health, safety and learning of children from birth to age 3. In my testimony to the Appropriations Committee, I forecasted that we would be focusing on better serving the needs of infants and toddlers. Our enabling legislation currently does not mention infants and toddlers - this implied mandate should become an explicit one.

**Section 2 enables investment in evaluation, performance improvement, and cost effectiveness to generate savings and value while measurably improving outcomes.** This proposal would allow the OEC to allocate to up to 2 percent from five agency line items to be used for system-wide program evaluation and improvement, interagency coordination and collaboration, and infrastructure evaluation. Those line items are Early Care and Education (school readiness and child day care), Care 4 Kids TANF/CCDF, Child Care Quality Enhancement, and Nurturing Families Network. Language amending the statutory language in each of these programs allowing for the 2 percent allocation appear in Sections 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7.

As noted above in my testimony, OEC is called on by law to be data-driven, outcomes-focused, and evidence-based with the objective of achieving better results. Our current resources restrict our ability to fulfill this mandate. This new authority must come with strict reporting obligations and rigorous evaluation requirements.

At a time of fiscal constraint, it is important to identify ways to improve our effectiveness and cost efficiency. This can only be achieved by evaluating our work, testing new solutions where we believe there is room for improvement, and creating systems that enable an emphasis on outcomes. This bill will enable modest investments – paired with a high degree of accountability to the legislature – to focus on those three priorities: (1) program evaluation within and across programs, (2) developing and testing innovations that hold promise of measurably improving outcomes for children and (3) systems improvements that make it easier and cheaper for government and providers to be results-driven.

The bill intentionally enables the up to 2% set aside to reach across line items. Programs most frequently operate interdependently rather than in isolation. The ability to understand and test where services interaction and cross-silo collaboration achieves better results (or fails to do so) is important to understanding how we can maximize value for service recipients and taxpayers.

While this bill will help us identify how to serve more children better, we will implement it without reducing access to OEC's high-quality services. The children and families we serve deserve our smartest work and our best solutions. Taxpayers deserve a government that strives to maximize the cost-effectiveness and impact of each public dollar. New breakthroughs in data access and analytics enable us to do this more accurately and cost-effectively than ever before.

**Changes to section 3 would amend the Care 4 Kids wait list language, enabling us to better serve infants and toddlers and to comply with the federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) rules.** This proposal would allow the OEC to operate our wait list to be in compliance with CCDF rules (Sec. 98.46 of the CCDF rules), which define priority populations.

OEC discovered, in our analysis of the impact of recently necessary wait lists on families this past year and half, that our current rules disproportionately harmed infants and toddlers and caused the infant/toddler caseload to drop at a much higher rate than older age groups. Since infants were not yet born when we began the wait list, they started out life at the back the wait list. Families most need access to safe, monitored care during the earliest years. In fact, as recently indicated by the Office of the Child Advocate, lack of affordable access may have contributed to the rise in infant deaths in illegal care during the closure of the Care 4 Kids

program. This change will allow OEC to correct the wait list rules to eliminate the disproportionate impact on infants and toddlers.

**Section 8 would replace the School Readiness per-child rate cap with a regular rate review of School Readiness and Child Day Care programs.** The fixed rate does not reflect changing economic realities and limits the OEC’s ability to create and manage an integrated system that is more sensitive to child, family need and the evolving demands that face our dedicated provider community. The deletion would alleviate the need to change legislation every time the rates need adjustment. It would allow OEC to set rates based on a frequent rate review with the dual objectives of improving quality and access and more efficiently managing the early care and education system as a unified, connected whole. For example, this would allow us to take actions coordinating funding streams such as rate parity for equally rigorous programs, offering bonuses and incentives for achieving positive child and family outcomes, or addressing child care deserts.

**Section 9 adds parental engagement and whole family supports that may be used through the two-generation initiative to the use of unexpended School Readiness funds.** This allows the OEC to use modest funding, when available, to enhance preschool readiness and school readiness through targeted investments consistent with our family-first, two-generational mandate. The two-generational initiative (pursuant to section 17b-112l ) seeks to achieve long-term success for low-income families by refining and enacting policies and programs that take an integrated, family-centered, results-oriented approach.

Finally, HB 4559 does not include our proposal to eliminate the reference to “grant” in the School Readiness statutes. Removing the reference to “grant” would give OEC the flexibility to eventually convert its grants to contracts over time. The ability to procure services under a contract would give OEC additional tools to enable progress toward our mandate to align, simplify, and streamline early care and education funding, and more efficiently deploy resources. We ask that you consider including this proposal in this bill.

Thank you for your time and attention to these proposals. I am happy to answer your questions now and/or at a later date, as well as continue to work together to better serve our families with young children.