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STATE OF CONNECTICUT

OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD



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Testimony of Beth Bye, Commissioner Office of Early Childhood Before the Education Committee

HB 6559 – An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Office of Early Childhood

H.B. 6558 – An Act Concerning Issues Relating to the Provision of Early Childhood Education and Services in Connecticut

March 8, 2021

Greetings, Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, 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 in support of the agency's bill, H.B. 6559 – An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Office of Early Childhood. I am also testifying concerning H.B. 6558 – An Act Concerning Issues Relating to the Provision of Early Childhood Education and Services in Connecticut.

H.B. 6559 – An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Office of Early Childhood

Our agency bill proposes a set of early care and education legislative changes aimed at accomplishing the following goals:

- Elevate the voices of families with young children to ensure state-funded early care and education is meeting family and community needs.
- Advance racial equity and transparency in decision-making care through changes to School Readiness Councils.
- Create mechanisms to address a shortage of high-quality infant and toddler child care.
- Increase financial stability for state-funded child care providers.

Section 1 adds an explicit goal that emphasizes the importance of promoting socio-economic, racial, and ethnic diversity within classrooms and among staff at facilities that receive state funding.

Creating a system that is equitable for all of Connecticut's children and families as well as the child care workforce is a critical component of OEC's long-term vision for the system.

Establishing this diversity goal will support our efforts to encourage programs to maintain socio-economic and racial and ethnic diversity among staff and children who are served.

Sections 2 and 5 allows the Office of Early Childhood to allocate state funds for licensed family child care services, within available appropriations, to equitably address the shortage of infant and toddler care.

Family Child Care (FCC) providers are a critical element of the early care and education system and their importance has been heightened during the pandemic as their small group sizes make it easier to follow public health guidelines and allow many parents to feel more comfortable sending their children to this setting. Beyond the temporary COVID-19 implications, FCC providers also provide more flexible hours and offer culturally competent care, both of which are of critical importance to many families of color who are disproportionately likely to work non-traditional hours. They also provide an opportunity to address the lack of high-quality infant and toddler care.

Currently in Connecticut, FCC providers only have access to Care 4 Kids funding to provide child care. By expanding FCC providers' access to other state funding sources, OEC set the foundation to support this critical provider sector in the early care and education system, increase equity of access for families, and more flexibly respond to the changing needs of families and communities. This is an initial step toward a more unified funding approach that is flexible across age groups, regions of the state, and provider settings; eases providers' administrative burden; and will be more responsive to the needs of children and families.

Section 2 allows the Office of Early Childhood to administer School Readiness funds through contracts to reduce burden on providers and agency staff, and align with how other state funding streams are administered.

Administering School Readiness funds via contracts will align School Readiness to the payment processes and reporting and compliance requirements of other state funding streams, which will alleviate the administrative burden of managing multiple funding mechanisms for both providers and OEC. This is another step toward a more unified approach that is flexible across age groups, regions of the state, and child care settings; eases providers' administrative burden; and will be more responsive to the needs of children and families.

Section 3 amends School Readiness Council membership by increasing parent participation, requiring efforts to ensure the Council make-up better reflects the racial diversity of the community, establishing meeting times that accommodate the needs of Council members, adding a local or regional workforce entity and a representative from a local employer. Members of the School Readiness Council would elect the chairs of the Council. It also charges the Council with collaborating with the Office of Early Childhood related to planning improvements to the state early care and education governance structure.

By adding stipulations around the presence of parents on the councils, the demographic make-up, and operating processes of councils, OEC will work with councils to make collaborative, equitable decision-making.

These changes also offer the opportunity for governance bodies to coordinate with other state agencies that impact the lives of the families they are serving. Councils will coordinate with a workforce development entity and a representative from a local employer to collaborate on how to best serve parents and families who are currently in the workforce, or who need access to child care to pursue their education and employment goals.

OEC will work with stakeholders to co-create a broader local governance plan that builds off these initial changes to continue refining ECE governance to ensure that bodies empower local communities, lift up family voice, and promote collaborative, equitable decision-making concerning allocation of resources.

Section 6 would ensure that within OEC information is utilized across divisions to monitor, evaluate and support licensed child care programs. This would improve OEC's responsiveness regarding specific programs and streamline the delivery of appropriate supports to help programs maintain compliance and improve program quality.

Section 7 would prohibit an individual seeking employment that requires the provision of care or unsupervised access to a child in a licensed group child care home or child care center from beginning work until that individual's criminal background check is cleared. This would bring Connecticut into compliance with federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) requirements regarding background checks for all licensed child care centers, group child care homes, and any license-exempt center-based programs receiving CCDF Funds.

Section 8 would change the age of a family child care home provider, household member, and employee of a family child care home, who must submit to a comprehensive background check from age 16 to 18. This would align with Connecticut's raise the age policy. Since juvenile records are currently sealed, information cannot be released to the OEC, and therefore, a background check has little value.

Section 9 would require licensed youth camp staff 18 years and older to submit to a background check, based on name and date of birth. Background checks are an essential safeguard to protect the health and safety of children. This requirement would be similar background check policy with licensed family child care homes, group child care homes, and child care centers, but would better align with the time limited and season operation of youth camps.

Section 10 would provide the OEC Commissioner the authority to waive the fingerprints portion of a comprehensive background check for individuals whose fingerprints are unavailable due to a

variety of medical conditions. The Commissioner would have the opportunity to review each situation, ensuring that proper medical documentation supports these waiver requests. The language is modeled after language from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Sections 4 and 11-14 deletes reference to “Nurturing Families Network” and replaces with “Connecticut Home Visiting System”. Rather than focusing on one particular program, known as Nurturing Families Network, the OEC is now approaching home visiting services holistically through several evidence-based models.

Section 15 expands the types of teacher endorsements eligible under the Birth to Three system. The Birth to Three System is experiencing a serious shortage of teachers qualified to work with families of infants and toddlers with disabilities. Teachers working in Birth to Three are currently considered to be working under their certification only if they hold the #112 endorsement - Integrated Early Childhood/Special Education, Birth-Kindergarten. Consideration of teachers holding other endorsements, who have the appropriate skills to work in Birth to Three, would help alleviate this shortage. In addition, Birth to Three has a mandatory comprehensive system of personnel development for all staff based on trainings and successful completion of exams that further supports the knowledge and skills necessary to use evidence-based practices in Birth to Three.

Section 16 clarifies that a person who may be a subject to a civil penalty for operating a youth camp without a license has the right to an administrative hearing. This aligns with policy for licensed family child care homes, group child care homes and child care centers.

H.B. 6558 – An Act Concerning Issues Relating to the Provision of Early Childhood Education and Services in Connecticut

This bill addresses several areas impacting early childhood services.

The OEC and the Governor’s Council on Women and Girls strongly supports Section 1 of this bill. This proposal would establish a pilot program in five communities to allow a family child care home license to be issued to a provider who wishes to operate outside a residence in an incubator, shared space. This bill would require programs to demonstrate compliance with local codes and ordinances while also affording the Commissioner discretion in the application of requirements.

The OEC supports this type of innovative pilot in efforts to expand licensed family child care availability, particularly for infants and toddlers. This model allows licensed family child care providers to work in shared space, create business efficiencies such as backroom administrative operations, and work together as a team. A business incubator provides a supportive place to launch a child care business and learn business skills that are necessary to building a profitable enterprise.

Section 4 would expand the allowable activities under the Care 4 Kids program, to include public or independent institutions of higher education; private occupational schools; Even Start; and adult education programs.

We know that well-structured career pathway based in education and training can support upward economic mobility for low-income families. At the same time, the OEC recognizes that parents face many challenges when they pursue further education or job training – including child care. This need creates an opportunity to support both parents and children in a Two-Generation approach. Although far from a settled matter, recent research suggests that a Two-Generation approach can disrupt the cycle of intergenerational poverty for these families and result in better outcomes.

The OEC has invested funds from the Two-Generation line item in five demonstration projects throughout the state. Four programs provide quality on-site child care at the Bristol, Danbury, New London, and Vernon Adult Education sites for parents participating in educational programs. The fifth program is a public/partnership that pairs child care with hands-on manufacturing training for parents. The OEC has partnered with the UConn School of Social Work to conduct a rigorous analysis of these programs. The evaluation seeks to understand best practices and outcomes, while lifting up parent voice.

The OEC is also collaborating with the Connecticut State Colleges and University System (CSCU) to expand Snap Employment & Training (E&T) programs with child care for students in SNAP certificate programs. This is a promising initiative that provides important data about linkage between employment and training retention and completion and access to child care.

The Governor's Workforce Council (GWC) has placed child care as a priority area in its strategic plan. Through GWC leadership, the OEC worked with partners to provide individuals enrolled in job training programs through the Workforce Boards with child care.

And on a national level, there is tremendous support to deeply invest in child care with an eye on quality, equity, better child outcomes, as a fundamental workforce support. Connecticut stands ready to use these federal dollars to bolster our child care industry.

While we support the goal of moving lower-income parents up the education ladder, unfortunately, previous cost estimates make the scope and breadth of this proposal unattainable, given state budget constraints.

Section 5 would add to allowable activities under the Care 4 Kids program a 90-day job search at the time of the initial application to the program. We acknowledge it takes time to look for employment and will take this issue into consideration as we continue to improve our child care system, using both state and new federal funding. As funding for this proposal is not within the Governor's budget, we cannot support this concept.

Section 6 would permit education and training activities as an eligible activity under the state-funded child day care program. Currently, the child care program contract requires that 80% of families enrolled must be working. There is no restriction on the type of activities that the remaining 20% can participate in, i.e. not working, enrolled in education and training.

If an enrolled working family loses employment, they are not dropped from the child day care program. OEC supports this policy as it mitigates a benefit cliff effect. For these reasons, we do not feel this proposal is needed.

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.