



Ned Lamont
Governor
Susan Bysiewicz
Lt. Governor

STATE OF CONNECTICUT

OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD



Beth Bye
Commissioner

**Testimony of Beth Bye, Commissioner
Office of Early Childhood
Before the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee
January 19, 2023**

Good morning, Senator Duff, Representative Concepcion, Senator Kelly, Rep. Yaccarino, and distinguished members of the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee. My name is Beth Bye, and I am the Commissioner for the Office of Early Childhood for the State of Connecticut. I am grateful to Governor Lamont and his commitment to high-quality early childhood services in Connecticut and for this nomination to continue leading the agency.

Leading OEC has been the highlight of my career in early childhood education. The challenges of COVID-19 – that are ongoing – have tested the agency and the field. Both are still adapting and working toward recovery and stabilization. And stabilization does not mean getting back to what was – it means new approaches. It will require careful study, feedback, and innovation.

State and federal investments in early childhood have increased dramatically since I sat here four years ago. In 2019, OEC was managing \$375 million in state and federal funds. In FY 2022, this grew to \$781 million and in 2023 will be \$720 million.

The agency is ready to continue its work to improve our systems. OEC has an incredible staff who stay focused on children and families, and who work to be responsive to the field of early childhood. Many worked 6-7 days a week and 12-hour days at the height of COVID.

OEC relies on contracted partners for much of our work – be it home visiting, Birth to Three, or child care. We are fortunate in CT to have so many agencies committed to high-quality services for young children and their families.

We are grateful to have an office dedicated to the young children and their families in our state. And we are grateful for our partner agencies like DCF, DSS, DPH, DOL, OHS with whom we collaborate on planning, administration, programming, and funding. One example is Universal Nurse Home Visiting where all these agencies have come together to develop a family-friendly approach to early intervention and support for CT families – born out of the challenges of COVID.

Phone: (860) 500-4412 · Fax: (860) 326-0554
450 Columbus Boulevard, Suite 301
Hartford, Connecticut 06103
www.ct.gov/oec

Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Employer

Connecticut is one of the first states in the nation to establish a state agency specifically focused on young children and families with their unique needs and their important place in our culture. Six states have followed. Just last week the Governor of Kansas called for the creation of an office. Having an agency focused on young children in place was particularly helpful during the COVID-19 emergency. While other states needed to coordinate across multiple agencies, Governor Lamont could direct one agency to keep child care, Birth to Three, and home visiting accessible. And we saw the impact of the speed of delivery of funds in 2021, when CT was the first state to get these funds out the door and, compared to other states, saw significantly fewer child care program close (national average = 9%, CT = 1%).

The OEC's charge is follow statutory and federal guidance and to make the best investments with those dollars, using our specialized knowledge about early childhood development. Research about the high return on these investments for young children, and their families is ubiquitous. This holds true for early education, child care, home siting, and early intervention.

The work of OEC is important to children, families, employers, and our economy.

The Office of Early Childhood reaches every community in Connecticut.

- We work with community providers and state agencies who identify families at risk and notify our home visiting programs. These include, hospitals, primary physicians, WIC offices, the Department of Children and Families, and the Department of Social Services.
- We support families with young children who have developmental delays.
- We license and inspect early childhood programs, after school programs, and camps that serve young children, to assure health and safety standards are met.
- We support low-income working families with subsidies for child care with the Care 4 Kids program.
- We combine that with state-funded early childhood settings such as School Readiness, Child Day Care, and Smart Start. These programs work with local communities to provide access to high quality preschool for 3 and 4 year olds.
- Our office also supports quality improvement efforts for early childhood programs.
- We are working with this legislature to approach poverty with a two-generation lens, as we look to work within and across agencies to help families.
- And for the past three years OEC has been part of the emergency and response efforts that were essential during COVID-19.

My education and experience have prepared me for the challenging task of serving as the Commissioner of the Office of Early Childhood.

I earned a bachelor's degree in Psychology, and my master's degree in Developmental Psychology. My research fellowship focused on the impact of child care and policies on children and families.

I have worked in many types of early childhood settings, beginning with national research settings.

- Boston Children's Hospital as a teacher in a large Robert Wood Johnson study looking at the impact of educational and medical interventions with premature babies. I was lucky to be there when T. Berry Brazelton was practicing and a consultant to the project.
<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c155/569a98d202dd49a7d5eabd3da13ed6ebcecd.pdf>
- National child care research project studying the impact that regulations had on program quality and child outcomes.
http://local.psy.miami.edu/faculty/dmessenger/c_c/rsrscs/rdgs/childcare/NICHD_EffectSizes_AmerPsy.2006.pdf.

I returned to Connecticut and worked in various child care programs.

- YWCA, Children's Day School, Trinity College Community Child Center, University of Saint Joseph.

I moved on to be the Director of Early Childhood for CREC and helped oversee and develop early childhood programs.

- School for Young Children on Asylum Hill (now Museum Magnet), Wintonbury Early Childhood Magnet School, Project Choice Early Beginnings, Birth to Three

I have had the pleasure of partnering with many families who have benefitted from access to high-quality preschool and kindergarten. Yet, I can still see the faces of hundreds of parents who desperately wanted to get into early childhood programs, but who could not afford them, did not win the lottery, or just could not access a high-quality program.

I understand the challenges that early childhood programs face with multiple funding streams and the anxiety that comes with licensing inspection visits. I did not ever run child care during a pandemic. I am still seeing and listening to the struggles of early childhood programs during the pandemic. They are dealing with a public health crisis, a staffing shortage, and a fiscal model that is precarious at best.

The charge of the OEC is critical for families and for Connecticut's future. We can help realize our opportunity as a state by supporting practices that lead to more optimal child development for all. We know that investments from the research of James Heckman that investments in early childhood have a 13% ROI through better education, economic, health and social incomes. At OEC, our work starts with home visiting prenatally and carries through school-age child care.

We can only do this work with partners - state agencies, hospitals, nonprofits, philanthropy, child care programs, schools, family resource centers, and so many more. There is still critical work to do to improve the system.

One step we took in November, 2021 was to institute the first-ever OEC Parent Cabinet to be sure parent voices are a part of our policymaking and programs.

Many of our partners and families face tremendous stressors in 2023. We have worked over the past few years with our federal funding and federal rules to try and reduce these stresses while expanding access for families. This work has happened under the leadership of Governor Lamont, and in partnership with legislators.

My overriding goal as Commissioner is to support optimal child development for Connecticut's children. And supporting optimal child development means supporting their families as well.

I look forward to the session ahead and working with you all, if approved, to support the shared goals of Governor Lamont, you and me for children and families.