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# STATE OF CONNECTICUT

## OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD



Connecticut Office of  
Early Childhood

Beth Bye  
Commissioner

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

**H.B. 5051 – An Act Establishing Early Start CT**

**S.B. 152 – An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Office of Early Childhood**

**February 21, 2024**

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Greetings, Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, 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 Governor's bill, H.B. 5051 – An Act Establishing Early Start CT and OEC's bill, S.B. 152 - An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Office of Early Childhood.

The earliest years of a child's life shape who that child will grow up to be, affecting their future health, education, and success. The Office of Early Childhood focuses on children from birth to age 5. Helping young children learn, develop, and overcome barriers will have benefits that last a lifetime. A key part of our work is supporting the providers, teachers, and other professionals who have dedicated their careers to caring for and educating children.

Governor Lamont established the Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care 11 months ago and charged panel members with crafting a five-year plan to build an equitable, high-quality, and sustainable early childhood system that ensures that every child has a sound educational foundation that will prepare them to grow, learn, and succeed. The plan provides a vision for Connecticut's child care infrastructure that will improve access to quality care for thousands of families through efforts aimed at affordability and stabilizing and expanding child care businesses and improving the quality of programs. The plan was informed by thousands of providers, parents, businesses, and interested residents.

While fully implementing the Blue Ribbon Panel would require a significant infusion of federal resources, one of the key recommendations in the Blue Ribbon Panel report, which the Governor's budget prioritizes, focuses on establishing a unified, streamlined, and coherent state-funded early care and education program. H.B. 5051: An Act Establishing Early Start CT begins this critical work.

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

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## **H.B. 5051 – An Act Establishing Early Start CT**

H.B. 5051 establishes Early Start CT, a new state-funded early care and education program that combines three existing funding streams: School Readiness, Child Day Care, and State Head Start Supplement. Early Start CT will streamline and simplify the system and reduce the administrative burden on providers, making it easier for families to navigate and meet local community needs. Combining the three funding streams would go into effect July 1, 2025, which will allow time for outreach and discussions with state-funded programs, planning, and implementation. The Governor’s budget includes \$279,000 to fund 3 positions to help support this work.

Currently, funding mechanisms for these three programs differ. School Readiness is a grant program that flows from the OEC to municipalities and then to programs. Child Day Care is a contract directly with the OEC. State Head Start Supplement is a grant program based on an outdated formula. Informed by the Blue Ribbon Panel hearings, Early Start CT takes the best of all programs.

Early Start CT will be a contract-based program. Providers will directly contract with the OEC, or a third-party intermediary, to manage the contract. This contractual relation will streamline and simplify the process, reduce the number of reports, and result in more timely payments. Existing OEC state-funded providers will be prioritized in the Request for Proposal (RFP) process. Funding for State Head Start Supplement will be maintained and shifted to the contract model. Importantly, providers whose facilities are funded with CHEFA bonds are exempt from the RFPs, ensuring fiscal stability.

Payments will be made upfront and quarterly, providing great fiscal stability and certainty for state funded programs. Programs will be paid by the classroom rather than by the child, again providing greater certainty and fiscal stability and reducing fluctuation in revenue. Paying by classroom will be allowable beginning July 1, 2024, so OEC can help stabilize programs as soon as data and payments systems can be adjusted.

Income eligibility will continue as currently required: at least 60 percent of children enrolled must be members of a family at or below 75 percent of the State Median Income (SMI). Early Start CT will use a slide fee scale for families based on income and aligned with the Care 4 Kids state subsidy. The program will be more accessible to families by eliminating the work requirement currently in place for the Child Day Care program.

Local community voice will remain a centerpiece of Early Start CT. Local Governance Partners, currently known as School Readiness Councils, will represent each community receiving Early Start CT funding. The Governor’s budget proposal includes funds to expand local governance

partners in communities with Child Day Care programs that do not currently have such a local structure, and to enhance administrative funding to councils.

Communities will employ a staff person to provide technical assistance and professional development for providers, engage families and other community stakeholders, and oversee a community needs assessment. The local community needs assessment will inform the OEC about the number of types of space types needed, and thus, guide funding allotments through the RFP process.

The local community needs assessment will be developed by the OEC with input from partners and communities. The assessment will be used to create a more efficient and effective mixed delivery system by accurately and equitably allocating child care spaces. It will also provide critical statewide, regional, and local data about child care and preschool needs in communities. Local Governance Partners will be funded up to 10 percent of a town or region's Early Start CT allocation, up to \$150,000 with a \$50,000 match for a local needs assessment and for a staff person to coordinate, monitor, engage community stakeholders and families, and collaborate with the OEC. The Governor's budget adjustment includes \$3.5 million to support this work.

Early Start CT will continue to focus on quality. As is currently the practice, all programs need to be accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, or the National Association for Family Child Care, or have Early Head Start or Head Start approval. Accreditation must be achieved within three years of entering into a contract with the OEC.

A major shift, as recommended by the Blue Ribbon Panel report, is simplifying state-funded staff requirements. Section 9 of this bill aligns the Qualified Staff Member (QSM) requirements with the national Unifying Framework, a product of 15 national early childhood organizations. The Unifying Framework sets out a three-tiered system of credentialing: 1) Child Development Associate Credential, 2) Associate, and 3) Bachelor degrees. As explained in the Blue Ribbon Panel report:

*The Unifying Framework sets a pathway for professionalizing early childhood educators' credentials and their compensation. It includes provisions to support and retain the current workforce, while transitioning to full implementation. Importantly, the state and ECE providers must adapt the framework in a way that supports Connecticut's early childhood education goals and considers how the current ECE system will transition to align with the Unifying Framework. Particular attention must be dedicated to how alignment with the Unifying Framework will affect family child care providers.*

The proposed legislation reduces the career ladder levels from the 15-step ladder previously in use to align three tiers for Qualified Staff Member requirements, as in the Unified Framework. It

outlines degree requirements by percentage of QSMs per state-funded program over the next 16 years. It caps expected QSM compliance at 60 percent of QSMs per program, honoring the reality that there will always be new staff coming into the workforce who are working toward achieving credentials, and those who chose not to seek early care and education higher education credentials.

This bill also establishes the Tri-Share Child Care Matching Program, a pilot program where child care costs are shared equally between the parent, their employer, and the state. Using \$1.8 million in ARPA funds, this initiative will be piloted in Eastern Connecticut, which is home to some major industries, such as Electric Boat and home to a significant child care desert. This proposal would support approximately 250 children in a child care program.

H.B. 5051 increases child care capacity by changing the licensing ratios to allow child care providers to care for more children in one classroom or home. Ratios for toddlers over 2 years old increase from a ratio of 1:4 to 1:5. School-age ratios increase from a ratio of 1:10 to 1:15.

The bill also increases access to child care for families by increasing the Care 4 Kids income eligibility from 60 percent to 65 percent of the SMI.

The bill also increases access by expanding the licensed family child care incubator model to New London County. Most of the rural communities in New London County are “child care deserts.” Expanding the family child care incubator model to an additional community is one step forward to building a network of licensed family child care homes to serve up to 9 children in each home.

## **S.B. 152 – An Act Implementing the Recommendations of The Office of Early Childhood**

S.B. 152 is the agency bill containing four sections, which are briefly described below.

### **Section 1**

Public Act 19-106 requires licensed child care centers, group child care homes, and family child homes to post information about developmental milestones for children birth to age 5 on the premise. This proposal clarifies that school-age programs are not required to post such documents as these programs serve school-age children generally older than age 5.

### **Section 2**

A Care 4 Kids protective services category was added to Sec. 17b-749 in the 2023 legislative session. One group of families falling under “subsidized guardianship” was not included in the legislation. This creates an inequity and therefore, we propose that subsidized guardianship be added to the statute for inclusion in the protective services category.

### **Section 3**

This proposed language requires the Commissioner to comply with and implement the Child Care Development Block Grant regulations outlined in 45 CFR 98 in lieu of state regulations 17b-749-01 – 17b-749-23. This change will allow OEC to expeditiously implement federal policy changes. The OEC will establish a Care 4 Kids policy and procedures manual that aligns with the federal regulations.

### **Section 4**

This proposal requires licensed child care centers, group child care homes, and family child care homes to allow Birth to Three professionals to deliver services on-site at the licensed setting. Birth to Three is Connecticut's early intervention system governed by Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). According to Part C of IDEA regulations, the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) outlines services that must be provided to the child and family in the child's natural learning environment. A natural learning environment includes a child's home, community, and child care settings. Interventionists and child care providers must work together to support children eligible for the Birth to Three system. These collaborations can improve services and ensure timely receipt of services. When there is a delay in receiving services or services not provided in environments that the child needs most, it could lead to a decrease in child outcomes. Further, allowing interventionists in the child care setting offers equitable access and support to children by providing the necessary support and services to succeed.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to answer any questions you may have. The OEC is committed to work together—with legislators, the executive branch, providers, advocates, and parents—to better serve our families with young children.

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*The Connecticut Office of Early Childhood 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. OEC is working toward better-coordinated, cost-effective services that support Connecticut's youngest children and families.*