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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. 5346 – An Act Concerning Early Child Care
S.B. 286 – An Act Concerning Early Care and Education
March 6, 2024

Good morning, 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 concerning H.B. 5346 – An Act Concerning Early Child Care and S.B. 286 – An Act Concerning Early Care and Education.

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.

H.B. 5346 – An Act Concerning Early Child Care

Section 1-3 would deposit unexpended School Readiness and Child Day Care funding into the Early Childhood Education Fund. The OEC cannot support this proposal as it is not in the Governor’s budget proposal for FY25. Unexpended School Readiness and Child Day Care funds often fund deficiencies in other OEC programs, such as the Birth to Three program.

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Section 4 would require the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) to conduct a study regarding the availability of state property for the provision of early childhood care programs, housing, and adult training programs. We support DAS' concerns in this section and defer to them as the affected agency.

Section 5 would require the OEC to conduct a study of the feasibility of issuing an Early Childhood Teacher Credential (ECTC) under section 10-520b to include individuals with experience in nontraditional child care settings and other forms of informal care. The Governor's bill, H.B. 5051, realigns staff qualifications so the ECTC would no longer be needed because the competencies are built into course work that are part of the degree requirement under the proposed legislation. Further, the OEC would have no way to verify experience in nontraditional child care or other forms of informal child care. Moreover, the OEC seeks to issue credentials to individuals in a formal early care and education profession, not unlicensed informal care.

The OEC has proposed changes that will simplify the pathway to be a qualified staff member, and OEC is happy to meet with the committee to discuss any parts of this proposal that may be improved to meet this goal. Early childhood educators are professionals, and the goal is to ensure all children have educators who can support their optimal development.

S.B. 286 – An Act Concerning Early Care and Education

Section 1 of this bill would require that each employee of an early childhood care and education program be paid an annual salary as outlined in the legislatively mandated compensation schedule report developed and submitted by the OEC to the General Assembly. "Early childhood care and education program" is defined in the bill as any licensed child care center or group child care home, inclusive of state-funded School Readiness and Child Day Care programs, and any license-exempt child care program located in a public school but not administered by the public school system.

Public Act 19-61 required the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) to develop a proposed early childhood educator compensation schedule for lead teachers employed by state-funded programs. The report was carefully developed over many months, informed by national research and data, and submitted in late 2022. The state-funded programs are the School Readiness and Child Day Care programs, serving approximately 16,000 children.

In the compensation report, OEC recommends the proposed compensation schedule be viewed as a guideline for programs, not a requirement to adhere to, due to variants in funding and staffing shortages across the state. The OEC also recommends that the compensation schedule be shared statewide as a baseline goal for early care and education wages - inviting all providers to assess the possibility of these expectations regardless of whether they are state funded.

While the OEC appreciates the intent behind this legislative proposal, the funds required to support it are not available and the proposal has the potential to price parents out of the market if not part of broader strategic and long term planning. Simply put, many Programs would close if these wages were required.

Section 2 would add an employee of an early care and education program as eligible for Care 4 Kids, regardless of the employee's income. We appreciate the intent of this proposal as we know nationally that early care and education teachers are one of the lowest paid professions and need help with paying for child care. Because of this, the vast majority of early care and education staff are already eligible for Care 4 Kids. The OEC is also concerned that opening the statute up to one group of workers will lead to a push to add other types of workers. This would have a significant fiscal impact on the program, and, depending on the availability of resources, could lead to low income individuals who are not in a designated professional class being excluded from Care 4 Kids. For this reason, we cannot support this proposal.

Section 3 addresses Connecticut's licensed family child care incubator model, the first in the nation model to expand and stabilize the child care industry. This pilot program, established by P.A. 21-171, allows a family child care home license to be issued to a provider who wishes to operate outside a private family home if they've partnered with an organization to provide child care services in a space provided by the organization, and is further approved by the Office of Early Childhood. This model allows licensed family child care providers to work in shared space, participate in comprehensive training, 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 build a profitable enterprise.

An example of a community working to establish an incubator program through this pilot is the incubator project in New Britain. This group has worked over the past few years to identify a building, bring the building into compliance with licensing requirements and local zoning codes, hire a director, recruit and train child care providers, among many other required tasks. We anticipate this first-ever incubator in the nation will soon become licensed by the Office of Early Childhood and are excited for the opportunity this provides not only for providers who may not otherwise have space appropriate for this service, but also for the additional capacity this builds in communities throughout the state.

The law, as originally written, allows for one incubator location to be established in each of the cities of New Britain, New Haven, Bridgeport, Stamford, Hartford, Danbury, or Waterbury. The pilot program is set to expire June 30, 2026.

This bill removes the sunset date, allows for more than one incubator project in a community, and expands beyond the seven communities identified in the statute to any community

throughout the state. We are supportive of these proposed changes but ask that the number of incubators be limited to 20 statewide. The OEC, in conversations with proponents of this bill, requested to cap the total number of communities to 20 for the time being, because we need to gauge the capacity of our licensing staff to provide technical assistance to get the projects licensed and ready to operate.

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.

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.