



33 Whitney Avenue
New Haven, CT 06510
Voice: 203-498-4240
Fax: 203-498-4242
www.ctkidslink.org

**Testimony Concerning H.B. 5026:
An Act Implementing the Governor's Budget Recommendations Regarding Education**

Cyd Oppenheimer, JD and Shelley Geballe, JD, MPH
Public Hearing before the Education Committee
March 10, 2008

Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and distinguished Members of the Education Committee:

We testify on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a statewide, independent, citizen-based organization dedicated to speaking up for children and youth in the policymaking process that has such a great impact on their lives.

CT Voices strongly opposes the Governor's proposed budget cut of \$ 1.8 million to school readiness programs in priority school districts and recommends mandating an increase in the per child cost in school readiness programs to \$8,514 starting fiscal year 2009.

Section 3(b) of H.B. 5026 would reduce from \$76,338,972 to \$74,538,972 the funds appropriated in FY 09 for school readiness in the Priority School District account. We strongly oppose this proposed \$1.8 million reduction. Section 5 of H.B. 5026 would allow 50% of any unused FY 08 School Readiness funds to be used to increase the per child reimbursement from the current rate of \$8,025 to \$8,266. We do support the authorization to use funds which might otherwise lapse to increase rates. However, the language in Section 5 needs to be revised, first, to *mandate* an increase in the per child reimbursement cost (rather than simply allow it), and, second, to raise this rate to \$8,514 (rather than \$8,266).

With the creation of the Early Childhood Education Cabinet in 2005, the legislature recognized the need to support and promote the development of Connecticut's young children. It is clear that three- and four-year-olds must have access to high-quality pre-school if they are to enter kindergarten ready to learn. Data suggest that among children without preschool experience: 25% enter kindergarten with insufficiently developed language and literacy skills; 30% are not ready on math skills; 45% have insufficiently developed social-emotional skills; and 59% do not have the fine motor skills expected of them.¹ By comparison, two years of preschool can lead to dramatic

¹ Connecticut Early Childhood Education Cabinet, "Ready by 5 & Fine by 9: Connecticut's Early Childhood Investment Framework" (October 2006) at 12 (citing Connecticut Commission on Children, State Department of Education, and the Connecticut Center for School Change, "Opening the Kindergarten Door: The Preschool Difference," (March 2004) (hereinafter "Opening the Kindergarten Door").

increases in school readiness in all of these areas.² However, as of 2007, nearly 13,000 children in Connecticut living in families with incomes at or below 185% of the federal poverty level still had no access to preschool.³

Last Session, the General Assembly appropriated approximately \$5 million more to School Readiness in FY 08 than it did in FY 07,⁴ allowing the creation of 1,008 new preschool slots.⁵ The FY 09 budget approved last Session appropriated an additional \$15 million to School Readiness over the FY 08 budget,⁶ which the Early Childhood Cabinet calculated would allow for the creation of approximately 1,900 *more* preschool slots (1,066 in priority school districts and 836 in competitive municipalities),⁷ as well as a necessary rate increase from \$8,025 to \$8,514.⁸ The proposed maximum per child cost of \$8,266 is insufficient to allow the proposed expansion, as it accounts only for a 3% cost-of-living increase that should have been awarded for the current fiscal year.⁹ The rate increase to \$8,514 is essential, as providers have made clear that they cannot, and will not, expand capacity at existing reimbursement rates.¹⁰

If the Governor's proposed budget cut is enacted, Connecticut will face two scenarios: fewer school readiness slots will be funded and created – leaving many poor children unready for kindergarten – and/or the needed rate increase will not be implemented, meaning that slots simply will not be created. Either is a step backward.

Perhaps equally important is the effect this proposed cut may have on slot expansion in the future. Providers have expressed strong concerns that there is no guarantee of funds for slot expansion, and have identified the absence of such a guarantee as a major barrier to their own willingness to grow.¹¹ A funding cut in FY 09 will only substantiate these concerns and will further dissuade expansion. Although the proposed increase in maximum school readiness rates in Section 5 of the bill is a step in the right direction, it is not enough. The proposed rate increase does not even account for the increase in the cost of living. Such nominal increases will do little to encourage providers to expand.

For all of these reasons, the Governor's proposed reduction in School Readiness funding must be defeated, and Section 5 of H.B. 5026 should be revised to mandate an increase in the per child reimbursement rate to \$8,514.

² Id. at 13 (citing “Opening the Kindergarten Door”).

³ Governor's Early Childhood Research & Policy Council, “Ready by 5 & Fine by 9: Connecticut's Early Childhood Investment Plan (Part 1)” (February 2007) at 19.

⁴ Specifically, the General Assembly appropriated \$61,388,972 million to School Readiness in FY 08, compared to \$56,338,972 million in FY 07. See “An Act Implementing the Provisions of the Budget Concerning Education” (July 2007), available at <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2007/SUM/2007SUM00003-R01HB-08003-SUM.htm>, and “An Act Implementing the Provisions of the Budget Concerning Education” (July 2006), available at <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2006/ACT/PA/2006PA-00135-R00HB-05847-PA.htm>.

⁵ The Office of the Early Childhood Education Cabinet and the Bureau of Early Childhood Education, “Preschool Expansion Report” (January 2008) at 2, available at [http://www.ecpolicycouncil.org/docs/2008-1-14/Preschool Expansion Report to ECE Cabinet.pdf](http://www.ecpolicycouncil.org/docs/2008-1-14/Preschool%20Expansion%20Report%20to%20ECE%20Cabinet.pdf).

⁶ See “An Act Implementing the Provisions of the Budget Concerning Education” (July 2007), available at <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2007/SUM/2007SUM00003-R01HB-08003-SUM.htm>.

⁷ “Preschool Expansion Report” at 6.

⁸ Id. at 6.

⁹ Id. at 5. Note, too, that although the bill *allows* an increase to \$8,266, it does not *mandate* this increase. This is a separate concern from the amount of the increase, but an important one.

¹⁰ Id. at 3.

¹¹ Id. at 3.