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Report on CT Early Care and Education Says State is Reversing Progress; Lacks Overall Coordination and Evaluation

NEW HAVEN - As Governor Malloy prepares to release his state budget proposal and a large state budget deficit threatens the potential for widespread service cuts, a report on the state's early care and education system finds that the state has already reversed progress in early childhood funding in recent years. The report by Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based think tank that advances policies that benefit children and families, also finds that a lack of central coordination of early childhood programs leaves child care providers and parents confused by a diverse array of programs, requirements, and funding sources. The organization called on state legislators and Governor Malloy, who has identified increasing access to preschool as a priority, to maintain early childhood program funding and to develop a more integrated approach to child care and early education.

"Connecticut's early care and education services need stronger integration and leadership," said Annemarie Hillman, Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices for Children and co-author of the report. "The state needs comprehensive reform to build a system that coordinates across programs and is more accessible for parents and providers."

Key findings in the report include:

- **After several years of improvement and expansion in early care and education, the state has recently reversed progress in funding.** Overall funding declined by 6.3% between Fiscal Years 2009 and 2010, the first decline since 2004.
- **Despite the need for child care from families struggling through the recession, fewer Connecticut children are being served as a result of these funding cuts.** While accurate calculation of the total number of children served by state-subsidized programs is difficult because of limitations in available data, Connecticut Voices estimates that overall, approximately 1,600 fewer infants and toddlers and 1,600 fewer preschoolers were served in October 2009, compared to October 2008.
- **Despite research pointing to the importance of quality to the educational value of early childhood education experience, and increasing educational degree requirements for child care providers, funding for quality improvement decreased by 14.7% between**

Fiscal Year 2008 and 2010 (adjusted for inflation). These quality improvement funds support a variety of staff training, professional development, accreditation and other initiatives.

- **Connecticut lacks a coordinated and comprehensive early care and education system. Currently, the state suffers from poor coordination and planning for its patchwork of state-supported programs**, including Care4Kids, School Readiness, Even Start, and state-funded child care centers. The study finds that child care providers must struggle to manage multiple funding streams, regulations, reporting requirements, reimbursement rates, and assessment measures. In addition, families struggle to understand and navigate a confusing and often overlapping array of programs and eligibility requirements. These problems were exacerbated when in Fiscal Year 2010, the state eliminated all funding for “infrastructure development” – efforts to plan, coordinate, and evaluate the early care system.
- **Young children are experiencing large educational preparation and achievement gaps.** Children from low-income areas are less likely to have preschool experiences. In the 2009-2010 school year, 95.9% of kindergarteners in Connecticut’s wealthiest communities had preschool experience, compared to 67.7% in the poorest school districts. By fourth grade, there is a vast achievement gap between socioeconomic and ethnic and racial groups. In the 2009-2010 school year, 84% to 91% of fourth graders in the wealthiest communities were at “goal” on the Connecticut Mastery test in math, reading, and writing, compared to 27% to 35% in the poorest communities. Because of a lack of data collection and analysis – tied to the state’s limited coordination and planning -- policymakers cannot adequately evaluate the impact of its early care programs in Connecticut and their impact on later preparation and achievement.

To improve access to and quality of child care programs, Connecticut Voices recommends that the Governor and state legislators:

- Maintain, and ultimately increase funding for early care and education.
- Create a coordinated system of early care and education, ideally through a state department in the executive branch (e.g., the Dept. of Early Childhood) that works to integrate existing program "silos," gather data to evaluate and improve quality of care, and fund services based on the actual costs of providing care.

“To improve the quality of early childhood education and achieve better long-term results for children, we need to understand what works and hold programs accountable for their performance,” said Cyd Oppenheimer, Senior Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices and co-author of the report. “Connecticut is simply not yet gathering the data we need to evaluate the state’s child care system.”

Connecticut Voices is a research and policy organization that works to advance policies that benefit children, youth, and families.

The report, “Connecticut Early Care and Education Progress Report, 2010,” can be found on the Connecticut Voices website at www.ctlkidslink.org.

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[Reporters: Please contact CT Voices for a listing of child care providers in cities and towns across the state who have expressed a willingness to speak to reporters about their local experiences, challenges, and successes.]

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