

**State of Connecticut**  
**GENERAL ASSEMBLY**



**COMMISSION ON CHILDREN**

**Testimony of Elaine Zimmerman**  
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**Hartford, Connecticut**  
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**United States Senate**  
**Hearing on**  
**Early Care and Education: The Front Porch to the Kindergarten Door**

**March 15, 2002**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

My name is Elaine Zimmerman. I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Commission on Children, housed in the Connecticut Legislature. The Commission is non-partisan and staffs all three branches of government on children's policy and trends in Connecticut.

I join you this morning to share brief comments on the importance of early care and education. There is truly nothing more important to the economy and our future than to help children thrive and parents work. When both are occurring smoothly, the youngest generation is usually healthy, safe and learning and the adults are, in the majority, providing the work participation our nation demands for economic growth.

It is hard to believe that lack of child care, a modest line item compared to other costs and a clear and research-based policy, can frequently be the crack in the plan. Yet fissures in our nation's child care access and sustainability can impede early learning, timely health interventions and employment opportunity for parents ready to work.

Lack of quality early care for families is like a loose log on the trail—it can trip up what is just basic foothold to us -health, curiosity, a place of safety, readiness for school and unexpectedly, equity. Yes, the lack of access to quality early care widens the achievement gap for those who are poor and minority before they open the kindergarten door of the schoolhouse.

**Stopping Social Promotion**

Connecticut supports Congress in the new education law, which has insisted on research-based practice and accountability in learning so that every child learns. We have in our state enconced standards teacher training and outcome-based planning. Concurrent with this, we are trying to end social promotion.

In our efforts to stop falsely passing children forward, we must look at what we need to do at the front end to help children succeed. We have learned that a key variable in the puzzle to allow children to move forward and not be held back in kindergarten, first or second grade is quality early care and education.

### **Bridgeport Findings**

Findings in one of our poorest cities show steady gains from quality childcare. Bridgeport followed children who had quality early care and education programming against those that did not. Children who had quality early care had fewer retentions, more frequent attendance, and higher reading scores throughout grades K-2. In the first grade, 47 percent of students (45 out of 96 students) who did not have quality early care and education were retained, compared with only 1 percent of students (1 out of 88 students) who had quality early care and education.

Those children in the Bridgeport study who had quality early care and education had stronger reading scores than the other children. First-graders who had quality early care and education averaged a score of 11.68 on the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), and all of those students exceeded the “substantially deficient” level of 10. In contrast, those children who did not have quality early care and education averaged just 6.84 on the DRA.

Early care and education saved significant tax dollars in decreased retention. In the Bridgeport study, retentions in K-2 cost 5.5 times more for those children who did not have quality early care and education (\$622,644) than for those who did (\$113,208).

Only one child with quality early care and educator programming was held back. The costs of the program were much less than the costs of retention, which was over \$10,000 a child. And these costs are just the literal costs per year. They do not measure costs to self-esteem, expectation of self as student, and eagerness to learn.

Social promotion cannot be stopped strictly through formal accountability in education policy. It needs also to have a precursor in early care and education. Early care and education is the missing piece to stopping social promotion.

CCDBG dollars that did this. Connecticut’s preschool dollars are paid for by a co-location of funds from CCDBG and education funds.

### **The Achievement Gap in Race**

In the recently signed ESEA, reauthorization bill, the key goals include narrowing the achievement gap between those who are successful and those who are not, particularly minority students and poor students.

Although Connecticut is among the top-performing states in U.S. Department of Education exams, black and Hispanic children trail white children by large margins.

Only 25 percent of black and Hispanic children reached the state’s fourth-grade reading goal, compared with over 70 percent of white students, according to Connecticut Mastery Test scores released on March 6, 2002. In the state’s seven poorest school systems, one of every three

eighth-graders was identified as a poor reader, compared with one of every 15 in the rest of the state.

Students from low-income families fared far worse in writing and mathematics than children from higher-income families. Only 37 percent of fourth-graders living in poverty met the state goal in writing; more than two-thirds (70 percent) of those above the poverty line met the goal. A majority (61 percent) of sixth-graders overall met the state goal in mathematics, compared with only one-third (33 percent) of low-income children.

Endeavoring to address the minority achievement gap, we discovered that two years of quality early care programming for three and four-year-olds blocked the early differential. In fact, minority children did as well as low-income white children. In new data from a study conducted in Middletown, Connecticut, the availability of a school readiness program accounted for an over threefold reduction in the number of low-income African American children “not ready” for school – from 12.9 percent (of those who did not attend) to 4.0 percent (of those who did attend). Among white children in general, 3.03 percent were unprepared for school.

In the Middletown study, low-income African American children who attended a school readiness program attained an average school readiness score (55.63) that was comparable to white children in general (57.59) and surpassed both white low-income children (51.16) and those low-income African American children who did not attend a school readiness program (48.37).

Additionally, this Middletown study found that children – across racial and economic lines – who attended two years of quality early care and education were significantly better prepared for kindergarten than those who attended only one year. The findings of the study, conducted by Walter Gilliam of Yale University, are consistent with an earlier Yale analysis by Edward Zigler and Walter Gilliam of all state-funded school readiness programs in the nation.

This nationwide analysis found that pre-K programs had a significant impact in increased competence, reduction in behavior problems by 4th grade, improved attendance and grades in elementary school, and improved state achievement scores. In addition, every state that looked at the impact of their program on grade retention found a significant impact.

These results provide strong evidence that quality early care and education programs can help to close the educational gap at kindergarten entry between white and low-income African American children. It is CCDBG dollars that finance this in Connecticut.

### **A New Divide Among Children - those with and without quality early care**

The former CEO of our most successful bank in Connecticut spoke to the state legislature last week. He was struck by the findings I just presented to you and suggested to legislative leadership that we might need two-kindergarten classes-one for children who have had quality early care and one for children that have not.

In his travels, he is hearing from kindergarten teachers about the divide they already see in skills between the children who have had a few years of quality early care and education and the children, particularly those from low-income areas, who have had nothing.

We saw the same problems when we met with kindergarten teachers to learn their views of early care and education. After all, the kindergarten teacher is the tollbooth between early learning and formal education. They informed us methodically that children are manifesting less ability to focus, more behavioral health problems, more aggression and less fine motor skills which they attribute to more passive activity like television rather than scissors and paper cutting or drawing or writing.

## **Literacy and Reading**

An outside reading consultant came to one of our larger cities to meet with fifth grade teachers. They had called her in, because they were about to conduct a state required education mastery test and they were worried.

What were they worried about? The children in the fifth grade could not read well enough to pass these tests. In fact, the children were being taught the entire fifth grade curriculum orally. They brought this reading consultant in from out of state because they were ashamed and worried. It never occurred to them that as fifth grade teachers they would need to concern themselves with reading fundamentals.

Can you imagine designing a curriculum as if you were in a country that did not have print? This is Connecticut, with the best education in the nation. Yet often our poor children and children of color are in a different story.

## **A State Plan to Improve Reading**

Connecticut created a Reading Panel to look at the skills and knowledge that teachers need to teach reading effectively. We brought in the best in the country, including many who are now working in Washington under President Bush.

We have implemented teacher training in how children learn to read, and we have reading plans in virtually every school. But what is also clear is that you cannot reach this without preliteracy and oral language development. It is like learning to run or skip before learning to walk.

## **Oral Language Development**

Oral language development and preliteracy are the bridge and precursors to language skills development in kindergarten and first grade.

Before entering formal education children should:

- Have more than 1000 hours of experiences with books, alphabet games, storybook reading and activities.
- Enjoy books and language and see the purpose of reading
- Have been included in conversation and treated as successful speakers and listeners.
- Have engaged in playtime that employs symbols (acting out roles, designing stories and using props.
- Be exposed to print and writing in their daily life.
- Understand how to handle books and know that print moves left to right.

- Have been read to by an adult who supports the child's view and creativity during the reading aloud.

### **Preliteracy in Early Care and Education**

Young children in early care and education benefit significantly from:

- Being read to aloud and being asked to be active participants in the reading.
- Understanding that print carries a message.
- Engaging in reading and writing attempts.
- Identifying labels and signs in their environment.
- Understanding that there is a connection between letters and sounds.
- Linguistic awareness games, nursery rhymes and rhythmic activity. (Phonemic awareness, a powerful predictor of later reading success, is found in traditional rhyming, skipping and word games)
- Letter sound matches and some letter identification.
- Temporary invented spelling to represent written language.

Early care and education teachers can:

- Share books with children, including Big Books and model reading behaviors.
- Talk about letters by name and sounds.
- Establish a literacy-rich environment.
- Re-read favorite stories.
- Engage children in language games.
- Promote literacy-related play activities.
- Encourage children to experiment with writing.

Without the quality environments in child care where teachers are reading to children, helping them hold and cherish books, the divide between those who have and those that do not, increases.

Also, parents are key to ensure love of language and curiosity in daily life. Parent and family members can:

- Read and re-read stories with predictable text to children.
- Encourage children to recount experiences and describe ideas and art that are important to them.
- Visit the library.
- Talk with children and engage them in conversation, give them the names of things.
- Provide opportunities for children to draw and print, using marker's crayons and pencils.

This happens at home for many--but it does not happen at home enough for those children whose parents cannot read, who do not have books or who do not know to tap on words, pointing the fingers at letters, repeat rimes, sing songs that rhyme. This is the work of both family and trained child care and early education workers.

## **Connecticut's Commitment to Oral Language Development in Early Care**

Clearly teaching reading does not begin in kindergarten. There are numerous activities that child care providers and early educators can perform in preschool settings to help children in preliteracy skills development.

Connecticut is now training all of our school readiness child care sites in oral language and preliteracy. For programs to receive quality early care and education dollars they must have a plan for oral language training. This comes from a combination of education dollars and CCDBG dollars. We cannot do it without CCDBG dollars.

Some states are now planning their prison construction, based on third grade reading levels. This shows with certainty that a third grader is not going to succeed in school if he cannot read is already hammered in. The kid's cell could be designed like a pair of jeans.

The choice is ours---but it is not just an elementary school choice, which you have so stunningly passed in spite of budget constraints and the disastrous backdrop of terrorism. The missing shoe is quality early care and education. If we want to break the achievement gap in learning and literacy we need to narrow the lack of skills at an earlier age.

## **Family Literacy**

*"Babies whose mothers provided them with opportunities to observe, imitate and learn, performed higher on IQ tests at age four than children who were exposed to the same teachings starting at age one."---* (Tamis LeMonde and M.H. Bornstien 1987)

There is a high correlation between the literacy level of the mother and the literacy level of the child. Yet we know that the literacy levels of moms coming off of TANF are very low.

Many TANF recipients are getting jobs and then being laid off, because they can read at a third grade level, but they cannot read manuals. So they get a job with the post office and then they are fired; they get a great job with U.P.S. and then they are laid off. We are losing workers constantly due to adult literacy gaps.

Our state is going to assess literacy levels of the moms before placing them in work. We see how many low-income adults are losing jobs after TANF. Not because they have emotional problems; they were never taught to read beyond third grade level.

Their children will also have a literacy gap, if we do not intervene. The key indicator of a child's literacy level is the mother's literacy level. Where does the intervention begin in language development to remedy this profound lack in language development? In early care and education.

## **Behavioral Health and Aggression in Children**

*"Violence is learned so it can be unlearned or conditions can be changed so it's not learned in the first place. It's never too late to change the behavior, but it is much more difficult to do it later rather than earlier."----* Dr. Ron Slaby, Harvard University

Early aggressive behavior, which is learned through imitation and direct experience, is the top predictor of later aggression. Increasingly children are showing signs of behavioral health problems in the very young years. In fact, in our state, we have facts that read more like a Robin Williams routine than a social policy. In 1998-1999, Connecticut schools suspended or expelled 1,914 children in kindergarten and first grade (458 in kindergarten; 1,456 in first grade). When you study the causal factors for these suspensions and expulsions, the majority are expelled for problems with behavior.

The last decade of research on the prevention of violence led to an understanding that violence prevention needs to start early and that, acting as early as possible, in the first five years, is recommended for successful intervention. It is in the under five years that a child develops mental health problems and where the severe behavioral underpinnings can be anchored to implode later. Yet, impoverished children are less likely to receive care for a behavioral problem because they receive irregular and poorer quality health care.

If we want zero tolerance in school, we need to reach the children sooner to assess, intervene, and refer children with behavioral health difficulties. This is cost effective, as when the behavioral disorder shows up in the classroom, the entire learning process is diminished and the child is often not given mental health intervention but some form of behavioral misconduct reporting which can imprint teacher bias towards the child.

### **Quality Care Returns the Dollars Spent**

When we invest in the early years, we save in out-placement, special education and in mental health interventions later, which are prohibitive in cost.

In Bridgeport alone, the children who were in quality care ended up not staying back in school. The cost of retention is \$9,000 and up to \$10,000 when you add on the ancillary costs. The cost of child care is significantly less, between \$5000-7500. Put starkly, we can keep children back later and pay more or we can provide quality early care and education and see children achieve with dignity.

Eighty percent of the learning disabled children in special education simply did not learn to read. Of our special education population, about 45% are learning disabled. This costs our state about \$397,526,000 or roughly \$12,951 per learning disabled student. The costs of special education are killing our towns and schools. Pre-literacy skills and oral language development begins with well-trained providers in early care and education.

The costs of the racial divide in achievement manifests in poor school performance, dropouts and low expectations of performance in the workforce. The additional cost is a searing despair- Langston Hughes said, "What happens to a dream deferred - does it dry up like a raisin in the sun, or does it explode?" Either way, depression or violence, the cost is plenty.

### **Changing Context, Changing Values**

There was a time when we did not want to invest in child care because we thought that women needed to stay home. Well, perhaps we should. But we have just created a welfare reform policy

that says that poor women need to work and work quickly. If women are working, where is the care for their young?

We are witnessing moms trading babies in parking lots like bags of celery and potatoes. Other moms are taking care of eight infants illegally to help the neighborhood work. Eight infants with one untrained provider is a recipe for illness, poor safety and learning failure.

Child care is like transportation. If you don't have it, you cannot get there. Yet, unlike transportation, there is no bus, even if you come in late. There is only sometimes a teenager down the street, a boyfriend or often the mom just lies and calls in sick.

This costs the economy. The number of sick days due to lack of child care is high. It is simply a white lie that is part of our culture because we have not yet admitted that family and work policy must offer care while parents work.

This costs in safety. I called the Department of Children and Families to ascertain where the deaths were of children. At any given time, the majority of child deaths are from informal care—often some unintentional provider who is supposed to be watching the children while the mom works. Usually, the boyfriend.

With cutbacks or level funding of CCDBG dollars, more parents will not enter the workforce. They will stay on welfare longer or leave welfare and flounder—because people are rightly not willing to work if their children are not safe and protected. This is the heart of the matter. Lack of dignity in work choice and safety at home for children costs us, unnecessarily.

Lack of early care is packaged chaos—ready to go off.

### **Quality Care with the Best Trained Teachers**

Early care providers are with children while their learning patterns are forming. Unlike the body, which takes 20 years to mature to 95% of its full size, the brain develops to 90% of its capacity in the first five years. At birth, children's brains have almost all the brain cells or neurons, they will ever need. However, these neurons are not yet linked into the networks necessary for learning and complex functioning.

Between birth and school age a process of “sculpting” occurs: some neural connections are made or reinforced and others die away. Early childhood experiences shape these connections; helping to determine which ones are maintained and which are lost. Early care workers need to know how to teach these young children, not just how to clean their diapers. (First Steps-Taking Action Early to Prevent Violence).

Parents want quality care with well-trained providers for these critical times in a child's early development. The majority do not seek out informal care as a matter of choice. A recent Bridgeport study of parents reflects this. Seventy percent of the parents said they would choose licensed child care when given the choice. The critical shortage of quality care, particularly for infants and toddlers, as well as the cost of care pushes many parents to choose unlicensed care because they have no real choice. In Bridgeport alone, 2,300 children are being cared for in unlicensed, unregulated care.



The early years are not simply fit for babysitting. They are in fact where language begins, where the capacity to care for others begins----or does not begin. The facts are uncontested that the underpinnings of a child's ego, self esteem, and lifelong learning patterns are sewn together before kindergarten.

### **Creating a System to Train Providers**

Connecticut has created a system of training for the field called Charts-A-Course. We have designed a method whereby providers get course credit for their work. They can accrue these course credits towards diplomas in high school, community college, and four-year college. We assess every course and determine its worth, sort of like a Betty Crocker stamp of approval. We have raised scholarship money for this and now see many more providers who come from diverse backgrounds coming in for training. In fact, the field has broadened in its race and ethnic diversity, due to this programming.

The state now relies on Charts-A-Course for a host of training opportunities. For example, they will provide oral language training for the child care field. As we position training for homeland security, they will host the child care trainings with FEMA. An infrastructure, expectation of quality, and insistence on raising the water level is methodically working. CCDBG pays for all of this.

Yet, child care providers are bailing out. It is easier in this day to get a job cutting hedges or babysitting dogs to make a decent family wage than child care. In fact, child care workers make less money than dog pound attendants. So we believe we should link increased dollars to increased training. Raise the water level for the children, keep the providers and elevate the field.

The turnover rate for child care is increasing. Children learn that adults are inconsistent in their lives. The child has parents in the workforce. Then the second or third adult in the child's life, the early care and education providers leave. Then the next early care and education provider leaves. The child, from a psychodynamic perspective learns not to bond, to trust or to relax into play. Object constancy, the internal learning that self is constant, which needs to be in place by the age of three, is threatened.

Constancy of child care providers and excellence in their work matters for the child, for the elementary school classroom and for savings for the nation. Yet we act as if children only start to learn when they open the kindergarten door. Actually, child learning patterns, curiosity, values, and moral development are set before they open that door.

### **Bioterrorism and Safety**

When the World Trade Center imploded, the child care providers at the child care facility grabbed all the emergency forms. They knew that the children might not have parents by the end of the day. They also knew there was a chance the parents might lose children. They left barefoot and told the children they were going for a walk. They put the children in grocery carts and began to walk. They walked and walked until they were safe. Then they stopped, pretended that this had always been their destination and began to design an intentional play event at a location that was safe. Every child was safe. None were lost.

These child care workers were trained in multi-hazard planning. They knew to protect the children. In our new context, we need our young to be in places where the providers understand safety, evacuation, communications and the psychological interventions necessary to calm children and facilitate their not being traumatized. Well-trained providers can do this. A babysitter down the street, a boyfriend temporarily watching a child, is less likely to have this kind of formal training in protecting our young. It is just one fact of early care and education. But it is a new facet.

In Connecticut, we are going to require all schools and child care settings to be trained in multi-hazard planning. In a bill, modeled after original language introduced by Senators Dodd, Dewine and Collins, we have added components that ensure that children will not be forgotten in homeland security planning. This sort of planning lends itself to a greater respect for the formal kinds of care we have for our youngest generation.

We will train every child care provider in multi-hazard planning. With the shadow of---bioterrorism, we are working on making sure we can access everyone. Where are they? How do we reach them? How do we make sure they are immunized? How do we protect them? We will work with the child care workers to develop a system of reaching every child in a health emergency.

I can tell you that as a mother now, I am more concerned about the whereabouts of my young children after school, and I want to be sure that those who are with my children when I am not, understand evacuation planning and safety. The young need this, as much as the public schools. And in both New York and the Pentagon, our children were safe in quality child care. This was not by chance. The early care and education teachers were trained in child safety.

### **Diversity and Global Connectedness**

Reflecting on September 11, it is clear that we want to sharpen our commitment to diversity and global connectedness. We studied the impact of difference on children, at what age children learn to notice difference and whether integrated settings make any difference on race bias for young children.

Child care and preschool can bring children together from different class and race backgrounds. Parents use the care near their worksite, are willing to travel for quality and reflect this in their choices.

A literature summary, performed by Yale University, made it quite clear that young children, by the preschool years, begin to think of their peers in racial terms. "Racial attitudes are acquired early and become harder to change as the child matures." (McConhay, 1981). By late preschool, children "evaluate [others] on the basis of racial-category membership." (Hirschfeld, 1996). The literature also shows that early integration may lead to reduced fear, mistrust and violence across racial lines. Exposing young children to multiracial peers may help reduce the likelihood of later ridicule or fear of other races (Hopson & Hopson, 1993), produce positive effects on intergroup relations (Slavin, 1995), and help "transcend some of the structural barriers that affect interracial and interethnic contact . . ." (Coll & Garcia, 1995).

Simply integrating a classroom is not enough. It is important to bring together children of different races and the same economic background in order to provide equal-status contact and less likelihood of mistrust, fear or violence. (Hopson & Hopson, 1993). Having a large enough percentage of each race present in each desegregated school is important in order to have equal power and status inside the school. (McConhay, 1981). Interaction should be cooperative, involve one-on-one situations and receive institutional support. (Devine, in press).

It is CCDBG dollars that allows this racial integration to happen in Connecticut.

### **False Policy Divide**

We can pay for the lack of quality care later in poor literacy, special education, increased divides between the skilled and unskilled, poor health care--- or we can do it up-front at the beginning. As a nation committed to prevention rather than crisis, and particularly now with the budget deficit and the need to honor every dollar, early is better, younger is better, quality is always better.

### **Bold Systemic Reform**

The question is not should we finance child care but what outcomes do we want for children? How can we reach these goals in the early years using research-based findings, best practices with proven outcomes and the lowest common denominator in dollars?

I believe the bold strategy here is to invest deeper and to expect more-not to invest less and expect it all to begin in kindergarten. Perhaps we need a Child Care Accountability Act to raise the overall training, expectations in outcomes with explicit requirements and stated learning transitions to early elementary school. Let's do what you have done for education in the early care and education domain. Because early care and education is the porch to the kindergarten door.

Put in a demand for excellence in health, safety and learning. Improve the field. You could demand training, standards, transition to school, health care linkages, only research-based practice. But don't harvest out the resources when this is where the seed begins to grow.

## Summary

Just like children who are taught to swim without fear when they are young, children can learn so many things when they are very young. Much more than we understood just ten years ago, they can learn love of language, love of learning, respect for difference, and caring is good.

We perhaps have created a false divide between what children need in early elementary and what they need when they are young. The young can learn and develop the patterns that can undo the achievement gap in race and poverty. But we need to start young. Poor quality care or no child care is the starter fuel for inequities in lifelong achievement.

I recommend that we train the field, rather than thinning it out. That we invest in the planting of the tree rather than watch it fall down easily in the first bold wind. The choice is simple--put resources in the beginning or put resources in the middle or end to remedy the cracks.

The question is not whether we should invest in child care to help children thrive and parents work...but what should the outcomes be in child care and how can we upgrade the quality and standards for the field? Now that we know that early care is the first staircase for learning patterns and early school success, we best hammer those stairs and help children ably climb them.