



Beyond Child Care Centers: Series Introduction

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I. The Charge for Change

Governor Rell, in the fall of 2005, charged the newly-established Connecticut Early Childhood Education Cabinet with development of a multi-year strategic framework to create a more streamlined system that assures that every child arrives at kindergarten with the skills necessary for early school success and lifelong learning.¹ No small task. In *Ready by 5 & Fine by 9*² the ECE Cabinet made recommendations to move early care and education forward in ten ways, including expanding the School Readiness program for at-risk preschoolers, ensuring HUSKY children receive regular well child visits, and developing a professional development plan for the early childhood workforce. The Research and Policy Council projected that implementing the recommendations would require a new investment of about \$100 million over the next two years.

Despite the ECE Cabinet's recommendations and call for significant additional public investment, it is fair to question whether the Governor's proposed Fiscal Year 2008 and 2009 budget³ includes adequate and *appropriate* investment in all the elements that are necessary to achieve the underlying goal of having all children ready for school and lifelong learning. This series of briefs highlights the need for greater innovation and unwavering courage to step out of simple program-focused solutions to real system reform.

II. Smarter Reform

According to a summer 2006 report, *Smarter Reform: Moving Beyond Single-Program Solutions to an Early Care and Education System*,⁴ authors Stoney, Mitchell and Warner argue "to realize ECE's (early care and education's) potential to benefit children, families, and the nation's economy, the focus of reform proposals must broaden." The paper maintains that the early care crisis has two components, and both must be addressed for truly effective reform:

1. The early care and education system is broken and it is failing families at all income levels.
2. Poor families need extra help accessing the system.

Early care and education is not only an essential service for children and families, but also a significant contributor to Connecticut's economy. The ECE "industry" is responsible for over 29,000 jobs - more than Connecticut's

¹ In addition, Connecticut established the Early Childhood Education Research and Policy Council to assist the Early Childhood Cabinet in estimating the cost of carrying out the framework.

² *Ready by 5 & Fine by 9* (CT Early Childhood Cabinet, 2006), available at ecforums.communityresultscenter.org/docs/Published_Framework.pdf

³ P. Oliveira. *The Early Care and Education Budget in Context: An Analysis of the Governor's Proposed FY 08 Budget*. (CT Voices for Children, 2007), available at http://www.ctkidslink.org/pub_detail_331.html

⁴ Stoney, L. Mitchell, A & Warner, M.E. *Smarter Reform: Moving Beyond Single-Program Solutions to an Early Care and Education System*. *The Journal of the Community Development Society*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Summer 2006), available at <http://government.cce.cornell.edu/doc/pdf/101-115%20stoney%20mitchell%20warner.pdf>

pharmaceutical industry. Each year Connecticut's ECE industry generates over \$920 million in gross state product.⁵ Much like the transportation system in our state, most of Connecticut's workforce relies on the early care industry to get to work every day. The early care industry makes it possible for over 160,000 employees to work, fully 10% of Connecticut's entire labor force.⁶

If the two-tiered strategy for change in *Smarter Reform* were applied to improving the transportation system, the logic of this simple plan is clear. It is obvious that you need both good roads and a means of transportation to solve a transportation crisis. If you only invest in improving the roads, and fail to give people access to cars or public transportation, you have not solved your transportation problem. If you allow people access to good cars, but there are no roads in their town, or the roads are in disrepair, or so congested that they do not get individuals to work on time, you have not solved the transportation problem. You need to address both of these essential components: reforming the broken system *and* ensuring fair access to it.

The reasoning is not significantly different for early care and education. The system is broken and it is failing all families at all income levels. Regardless of the location of the child care site or the income of the parent, the early care workforce as a whole is underpaid, quality is uneven, and parents grow anxious hoping to find a space for their child at the few sites available. We need to both fix the system so that it works for all families *and* pay special attention to poor families who need extra help accessing it.

III. Beyond Child Care Centers

Much attention has been paid to care provided in Connecticut through the conventional child care center model. Yet, after a decade on this path, little progress has been made on the achievement gap or in improving access to preschool services. In this series of reports we explore some of the missing links in Connecticut's early care and education reform agenda for young children.

- *From Programmatic Duct Tape to Real System Reform* summarizes current research on early care and education reform and uses this information to propose simple steps to move Connecticut toward positive system reform that better integrates our existing patchwork of fragmented early care and education programs.
- *Infant and Toddler Child Care* explores Connecticut's reluctance to fully address the developmental and quality child care needs of its infants and toddlers, as well as address the financial burdens for families of infant and toddler child care. While Connecticut commits some significant resources to pre-natal care and to maternal and newborn health and then again, three years later, provides some financial and community support for preschool; but there is a huge gap during the forgotten years from birth to age three. Ironically, these three years are *the most* important to a child's healthy development, yet they are the years in which Connecticut makes the smallest investment, and takes the least responsibility.
- *The Essential Role of Home-Based Child Care in Connecticut's Early Care and Education System* highlights the extensive use of family-based and kith and kin care in Connecticut, and suggests that ensuring that families have access to high quality licensed and unregulated home-based care is essential to maintaining a strong and stable workforce and narrowing the school readiness gap between children from low-income and more affluent families.

⁵ *The Economic Impact and Profile of Connecticut's ECE Industry*. (Connecticut Center for Economic Analysis, 2004), available at www.ctkidslink.org/publications/ece04econimpactfull10.pdf

⁶ *The Economic Impact and Profile of Connecticut's ECE Industry*. (Connecticut Center for Economic Analysis, 2004), available at www.ctkidslink.org/publications/ece04econimpactfull10.pdf

- *Supporting Working Families as the Foundation of Connecticut's Early Care and Education System* acknowledges the very real stress that virtually *all* Connecticut families are under right now: declining wages, increased working hours, and the pressure to either work and pay for child care or quit and stay home. Importantly, some options for child care in the early years are proposed as alternatives to existing child care centers where high staff turnover jeopardizes children's emotional development while high costs jeopardize family economic security. This report suggests how early care system reform can play a role in providing the foundation for children's healthy development, including providing for the financial supports (such as through paid family leave) that needed in our current economy to help parents who are, after all, the primary teachers of "ready" children.