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Investing in the Early Years: A Great Return for Kids and for Connecticut

**Candidate Briefing
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Investing in the first five years of children's lives benefits the children, their parents, and society at large. High quality caring and learning environments in the early years – **starting at birth** – are necessary if children are to be ready to enter school at age five. Affordable early care and education allows parents to participate in the workforce, and sets the stage for the next generation of workers to be productive members of society. There is evidence that children who participate in these programs are less likely to be retained in school, less likely to need special education services, and more likely to graduate from high school. They are also less likely to become involved with the welfare system, less likely to be involved in criminal activity, and more likely to be productively employed. In other words, they cost society and government less and contribute more.



Though Connecticut has publicly recognized these many advantages of investing in early care and education, its funding for early care and education remains insufficient to make this goal a reality. Indeed, even with significant new

dollars for early care and education included in the Fiscal Year 2013 budget, overall state funding for early care (adjusted for inflation) remains **lower** than it was in 2002. Furthermore, while the state has many of the pieces of a strong system of services for young children and their families, it still lacks a comprehensive infrastructure to coordinate programs, agencies, and funding (though it is in the process of creating a plan to achieve such a system).

The first 1,000 days of a child's life are a time of rapid cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and motor development. For this development to occur, children must receive adequate stimulation. Low-income children are at particular risk for not receiving this stimulation in their own homes. It is possible to improve outcomes for these children by— among other things — improving prenatal health and nutrition; providing home visitation services and wraparound services in the areas of health, mental health, and social-emotional development; and providing access to language-rich, nurturing, and responsive caregiving during their first three years of life.

Connecticut's funding for infant and toddler care does not reflect its importance. The average state reimbursement rate for infants and toddlers in state-funded child care centers is only slightly higher than preschooler rates, despite the fact that it is much costlier to care for infants and toddlers than for preschoolers (since more staff are required). Reimbursement rates for Care4Kids, the state's

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child care subsidy program, which served an average of more than 21,000 children per month in Fiscal Year 2011 (more than a third of whom were infants and toddlers), have not been increased since 2001. This means that state-funded centers are struggling to keep their infant-toddler programs afloat, and children receiving Care4Kids often lack access to the higher cost, higher quality programs. Additionally, spending on Care4Kids in Fiscal Year 2012 was 33% less than it was in Fiscal Year 2002 (adjusted for inflation).

Preschool is another critical time for children, necessary to reinforce and continue brain development, vocabulary expansion, and social maturation. Two years in a high-quality preschool setting results in dramatic increases in language and literacy skills, math skills, social-emotional skills, and fine motor skills. Preschool attendance has significant impact on kindergarten readiness and performance in kindergarten – it is a critical step to ensuring children enter school ready to learn and succeed.

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Although Connecticut invested significant new dollars in preschool in the Fiscal Year 2013 budget, more dollars are needed if we want to ensure universal access to high-quality preschool programs. The new dollars for Connecticut's School Readiness program will create 1,000 new preschool slots, but, according to a 2011 report by the State Department of Education (SDE), at least 5,600 new slots were needed to accommodate 3- and 4-year-olds in the 19 Priority School Districts alone (leaving aside the other school districts in Connecticut). SDE estimated that the cost to serve these 5,600 children would be \$40 million, while the capital costs to create the classrooms would be \$211 million.

High-quality programs require a high-quality workforce. Although recent legislation has heightened the educational requirements for many early care and education workers, salaries are so low, and opportunities to obtain higher degrees so costly and inaccessible, that it is hard to attract and retain the most qualified people. Connecticut acknowledged the importance

of enhancing teacher quality with its investment of an additional \$3 million for professional development in the FY 2013 budget, but significant changes in scholarship opportunities and compensation will have to be made in order to create a strong, sustainable early care and education workforce base.

Increasing state funding for early care and education helps working parents as well as children. There is no reason why "early childhood programs" cannot also be "work support programs." If funding for early care and education is spent wisely, it will serve the dual purposes of promoting child development and enabling parents to work. Center-based child care in Connecticut costs, on average, about \$12,960 per year for infants and toddlers, \$10,666 per year for preschoolers, and \$1,656 per year for school-age children. For a single working mother with income at the maximum eligibility level for Care4Kids who is raising an infant and school-age child, child care would cost 37% of her annual income, if no subsidy is provided. Without assistance, quality care is simply unaffordable for most low-income and many middle-income families in Connecticut. State funding is a crucial element in enabling parents to maximize future prospects for both their children and themselves.

Connecticut can improve the quality of its early care and education programs and expand access to services by:

- Increasing per-child funding for all state-subsidized early care and education programs to a rate based on the actual cost of providing high quality programs;
- Increasing funding for professional development and scholarship assistance for child care staff;
- Continuing to expand early care and education subsidies so that all eligible children have access to programs;
- Expanding consultation and wraparound services in the areas of children's health, mental health, and social-emotional development; and
- **Most importantly**, creating an infrastructure for our early care and education programs that reduces bureaucracy, facilitates access, ensures uniform standards, holds programs accountable, and heightens quality of all state-subsidized programs.