



# Early Childhood Education in Connecticut

## Analysis and Implications

A 2015 CONNCAN REPORT

## Introduction

For a decade, the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN) has led a movement to improve educational outcomes for Connecticut's kids and close our state's achievement gap, which has been noted as the largest in the nation. Working with parents, educators, advocates and policymakers, we have sought to advance policies in Connecticut that:

- Ensure every student in Connecticut has access to a high-quality public school, regardless of race, wealth or zip code;
- Provide and support high-performing teachers, principals and leaders for all Connecticut kids and schools; and
- Establish an equitable education funding formula that supports all public school students fairly, regardless of the wealth of the community they live in or what type of school they attend.

Research shows that high-quality public schools can have a profound and lasting impact on students. Great schools and great educators have the ability to change lives. Over the course of our advocacy, however, we have seen what research makes clear, unfortunately, too many children start their schooling already far behind.

While exceptional elementary schools can and have overcome the variation in students' early childhood experiences, doing so requires tremendous effort and skill. If we are serious about closing the achievement gap and giving all Connecticut's children an excellent education, we must couple the necessary improvements in our K-12 public schools with policies and investments that ensure that all Connecticut children, especially our traditionally disadvantaged students, have the opportunity to attend a high-quality preschool. To maximize the impact of our existing investments, we must start by better integrating our currently fragmented early childhood programs and improving the quality of teaching in those programs. This report primarily focuses on how to successfully do just that. We must also invest more in quality early childhood education programs—both to ensure that current programs have the resources they need to provide skilled teachers and high-quality learning experiences for all children and to expand access to children who currently lack it. All children in Connecticut's high-poverty communities should be able to attend and benefit from high-quality preschool programs that ensure they enter school on track to succeed.

Reducing the need for remediation in the early years will not only help narrow the achievement gap, but it will also enable our high-performing schools to further accelerate children's learning to even greater levels. Research suggests that investment in early childhood education yields both short and long-term economic benefits for families and the state, by enabling parents to work when their children are in preschool; increasing rates of high school graduation, postsecondary attainment, employment and earnings for preschool graduates as adults; and decreasing rates of crime and dependence on public support. In other words, high-quality early childhood education is a crucial part of a two-generational strategy to break the cycle of poverty.

Since the 1960s, Connecticut has invested in young children's learning and development. Over time, however, our early childhood education system has fallen behind. Over the past three years, Connecticut leaders have taken steps to improve early childhood education by expanding access to state-funded pre-k, and policymakers and advocates, such as the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance, successfully pushed for the establishment of the Office of Early Childhood. Despite these efforts, too many children in our high-poverty districts continue to lack access to pre-k, quality standards in state-funded programs do not match what is needed to ensure School Readiness and our early childhood system remains fragmented and inefficient.

Connecticut needs a strategic, long-term process for building an early childhood education system. This report seeks to help advance that process. While we acknowledge that an early childhood education system encompasses a wide range of programming and services within the birth to eight spectrum, for the purposes of this report, we focus on access to high-quality public pre-k programs in the state.

First, this report explains why high-quality early childhood education is essential to Connecticut's educational and economic future. Next, it describes the current status of young children in Connecticut and the state's early childhood system. This report then identifies lessons for Connecticut policymakers by reviewing evidence on the impact of high-quality public pre-k programs from other states. In addition, this report offers short and long-term policy changes to enable Connecticut to replicate the success of these programs. Although we see a clear need to improve Connecticut's early childhood system and policies, we also recognize that high-quality models of early childhood education already exist in our state. These programs motivate us to advocate for more children to have access to similar learning experiences. Throughout the report, we offer examples of high-quality early childhood programs currently serving Connecticut children and families. We hope that their examples, along with the research cited in this report, will encourage more Connecticut citizens and policymakers to support high-quality learning for our youngest Connecticutians.

## I: Early Childhood Education Matters

### The early years are crucial for children’s development and learning

Over the past 50 years, researchers from a variety of disciplines—psychology, child development, neuroscience and molecular and behavioral genetics—have vastly expanded our understanding of how children’s minds develop in the early years of life. The research is clear: the first five years of a child’s life are a period of constant, rapid learning that forms a critical foundation for later success in school and life. We know that from birth, young children actively absorb information about the world around them, forming brain connections that shape and support future learning.

Young children are natural learners and their environments, experiences and relationships with parents and other adult caregivers play a crucial role in shaping their early learning. These early experiences influence children’s future school and life outcomes by creating a strong or fragile foundation for later learning and relationships. Research also shows that effective early childhood interventions can increase the likelihood that children have the kinds of experiences and relationships that support early learning and development and influence the trajectory of their lives.

#### *Disparities in children’s early learning experiences contribute to educational achievement gaps*

Children’s early learning experiences vary dramatically. Families of all income levels and racial or ethnic backgrounds can support their children’s learning. For a variety of reasons—including the stresses of poverty, cultural expectations around how adults interact with children and parents’ own struggles with literacy or mental health issues—children and low-income families are less likely to be read to regularly, exposed to rich vocabulary, or taken to libraries and museums than their middle class or affluent peers. By age 3, children from the most disadvantaged families have heard 30 million fewer words than children from professional families. Low-income children are also less likely to attend preschool than their more affluent peers.

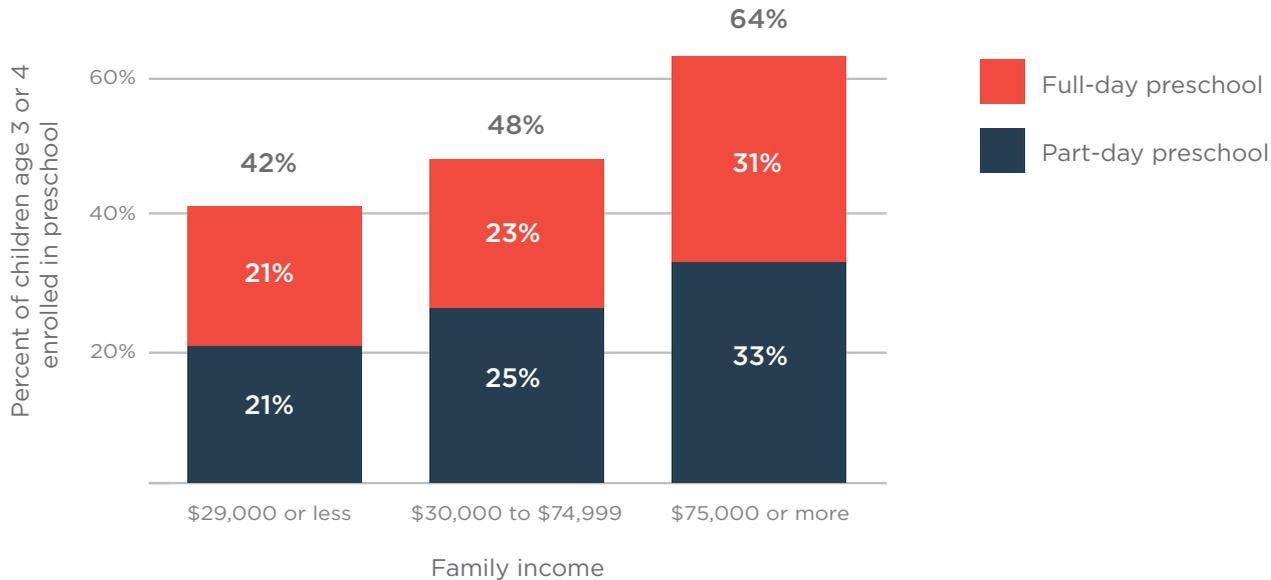
“From birth to age 5, children rapidly develop foundational capabilities on which subsequent development builds. In addition to their remarkable linguistic and cognitive gains, they exhibit dramatic progress in their emotional, social, regulatory and moral capacities. All of these critical dimensions of early development are intertwined and each requires focused attention.”

–*Neurons to Neighborhoods*  
(National Research Council, 2000)

Burkham, David T. & Valerie E. Lee, *Inequality at the Starting Gate*, Econ. Policy Inst. (2002), available at [http://www.epi.org/publication/books/starting\\_gate](http://www.epi.org/publication/books/starting_gate). Hart, Betty & Todd Risley, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young Children*, Brookes Publishing (1995).

Figure 1. Low-income children are less likely to attend preschool

National preschool enrollment by family income\*



As a result of disparities in early learning experiences, low-income children enter school already significantly behind. Achievement gaps by race and ethnicity are visible at kindergarten entrance. Researchers estimate that between one-third and one-half of the African American/white achievement gap at high school completion already exists before children start first grade. Gaps by socio-economic status are similarly large.

U.S. Census Bureau & U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Population Survey 2013 Table 3: Nursery and Primary School Enrollment of People 3 to 6 Years Old, by Control of School, Attendance Status, Age, Race, Hispanic Origin, Mother's Labor Force Status and Education and Family Income*, available at <https://www.census.gov>. Jencks, Christopher & Meredith Phillips eds., *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, Brookings Inst. Press (1998).

\*Family income refers to combined income of all family members who are 15 years of age or older.

Figure 2. Achievement gaps by family income exist at kindergarten entrance

National math and reading assessment scores at kindergarten entrance by income, fall 2010

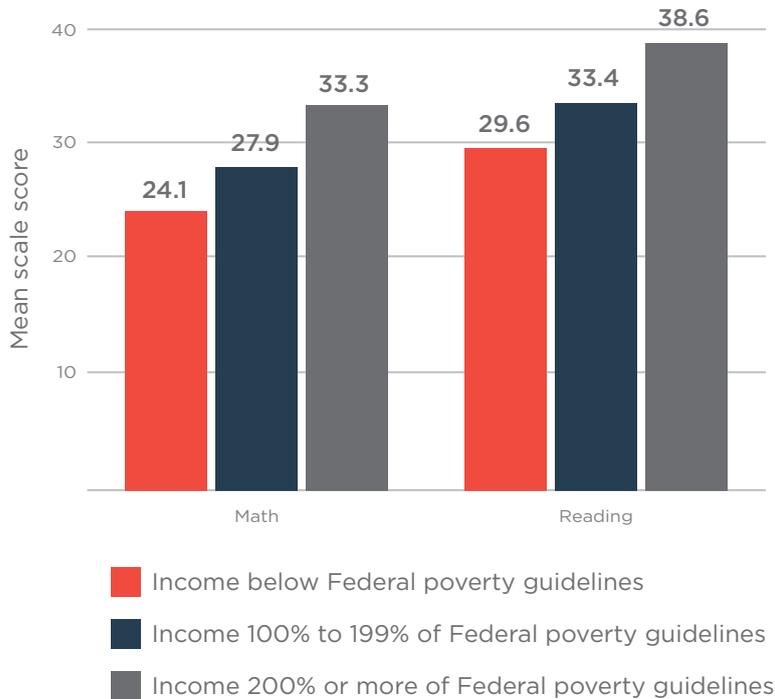
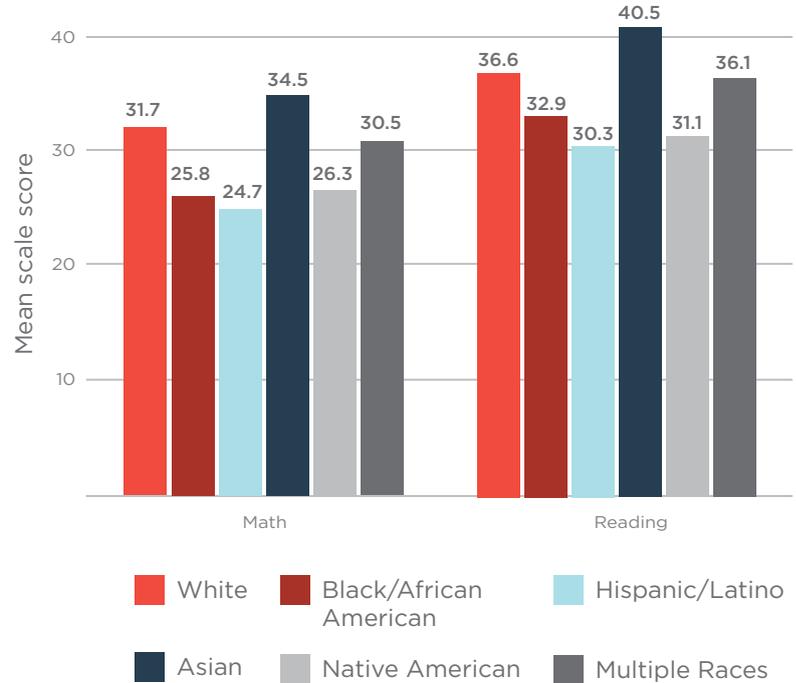


Figure 3. Achievement gaps by race and ethnicity exist at kindergarten entrance

National math and reading assessment scores at kindergarten entrance by race and ethnicity, fall 2010



Mulligan, Gail M., et al., First-Time Kindergarteners in 2010-11: *First Findings From the Kindergarten Rounds of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2010-11* (ECLS-K:2011) (NCES 2012-049), Nat'l Ctr. for Educ. Statistics (2012), available at <https://nces.ed.gov/ecls>.

Poverty status is based on preliminary U.S. Census thresholds for 2010.

Additional information about the Direct Cognitive Assessments is available at <https://nces.ed.gov/ecls/assessments2011.asp>.

## ***High-quality early childhood programs can improve children's school readiness and long-term educational and life outcomes***

The good news is that high-quality early childhood programs can mitigate the impact of disparities in early learning experiences and put children on track for improved outcomes in school and beyond. For example, children who participated in the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study, a high-quality preschool demonstration program, had higher IQ scores at age 5, higher educational achievement at age 14 and were more likely to graduate from high school than children in a control group not assigned to preschool. The positive effects of high-quality preschool also appear to last well into adulthood. Children who attended the Perry Preschool program had higher earnings and were less likely to be on welfare or engage in criminal activity as adults.

The Perry Preschool project was a relatively small, boutique program implemented in the 1960s. More recent studies of state-funded pre-k programs in New Jersey and Oklahoma, as well as district-funded programs in Boston and Chicago, have also found that these preschool programs produce learning gains similar to those found in the Perry Preschool program. These positive impacts last into at least the late elementary grades (the most recent years studied for these programs). These results show that high-quality, publicly-funded preschool programs can make a meaningful difference in children's lives.

## ***Supporting early learning makes economic sense***

Beyond the benefits for individual children, high-quality early childhood programs yield economic benefits for the broader community. High-quality early childhood programs support parental employment while children are in preschool, increasing tax revenues and benefiting the local economy. Researchers estimate that every dollar spent on child care in Connecticut yields two dollars in increased economic activity for the state.

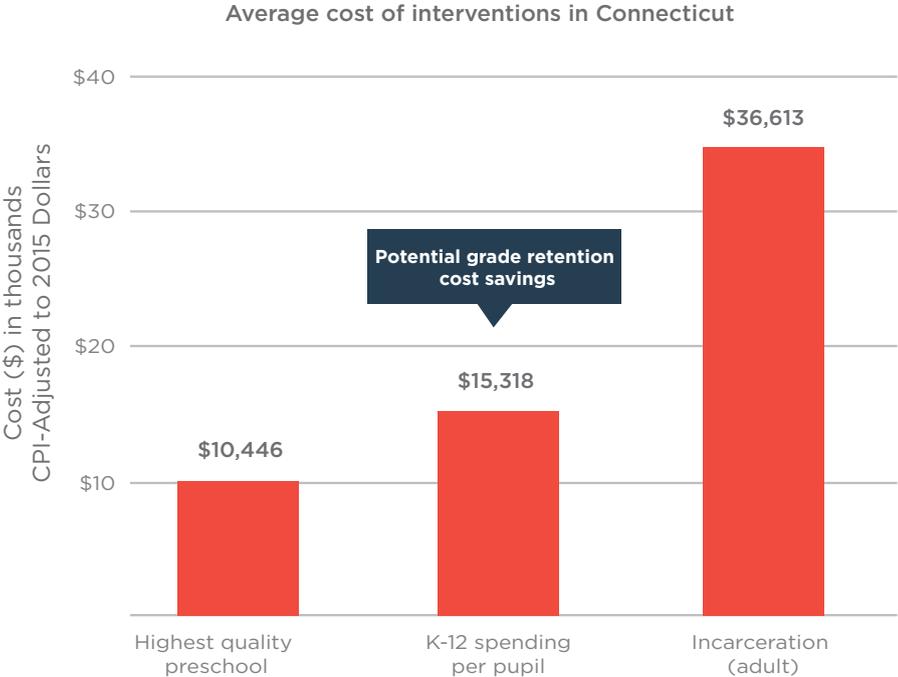
Investing early in children's development also reduces the need for more costly interventions later on. Preschool participation lowers rates of special education and grade retention once children enter school—yielding savings for the public education system. Once children reach adulthood, lower rates of criminal activity and public dependence yield further savings in social service and criminal justice costs. Increased employment rates and earnings for adult preschool alumni benefit the larger economy and yield increased tax revenues.

Schweinhart, L. J., et al., *Lifetime Effects: The HighScope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*, HighScope Press (2005), available at <http://www.highscope.org>.

Liu, Zhilin, et al., *Child Care Multipliers: Analysis from Fifty States Linking Economic Development and Child Care*, Cornell University (2004), available at

6 <http://economicdevelopment.cce.cornell.edu>.

Figure 4. Spending on pre-k today saves money down the road



As demonstrated in Figure 4, the savings make early childhood programs a smart economic investment. Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman estimates a seven to ten percent annual return on initial public investments on preschool programs. Other research has estimated savings ranging from \$2.62 to more than \$10 per every dollar spent on pre-k programs. In general, investments in early childhood programs are more effective and yield much greater returns than later interventions.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, CPI Inflation Calculator, available at <http://www.bls.gov>. Gault, Barbara et al., *Meaningful Investments in Pre-K: Estimating the Per-Child Costs of Quality Programs*, Inst. for Women’s Policy Research (2008), available at <http://www.iwpr.org>. Bureau of Grants Mgmt., *2013-14 Net Current Expenditures Per Pupil*, Conn. State Dept. of Educ., available at <http://www.sde.ct.gov>. Conn. Dept. of Corr., *2014 Annual Report*, available at <http://www.ct.gov/doc>. Heckman, James J., *Invest in Early Childhood Development: Reduce Deficits, Strengthen the Economy* (2012), available at <http://heckmanequation.org>. Reynolds, Arthur J. & Judy Temple, *Cost-Effective Early Childhood Development Programs from Preschool to Third Grade*, Vol. 4 Annual Review of Clinical Psychology (Apr. 2008), available at <http://papers.ssrn.com>.

## FRIENDS CENTER FOR CHILDREN

Friends Center for Children is a high-quality early childhood education program in New Haven that provides full-day child care and early education to 84 children between the ages 3 months to 5 years. Founded in 2007 by members of the New Haven Society of Friends (Quakers), Friends Center for Children is an independent, non-sectarian program whose educational approach is informed by Quaker education and values.

Friends Center for Children uses a child-centered, progressive educational approach that supports hands-on, play-based learning; focuses on meeting each child's unique developmental needs; and integrates the Quaker values of community, equality, peace, simplicity, truth and stewardship. To implement this approach, Friends Center for Children employs qualified teachers with a bachelor's degree and training in early childhood education.

In addition to its work with children directly, Friends Center for Children seeks to empower parents to support their children's learning and development. Its cooperative educational model—in which parents commit to volunteer 1.5 hours a week for the school—provides opportunities for educators to model adult/child interactions and best practices for parents. Recognizing that parents' work and other obligations make traditional cooperative volunteering difficult for many families, the Center offers a wide range of volunteer opportunities, including activities that families can do at home or on their own time. The Center also offers workshops for families on a range of topics, including behavior management, navigating school choice, engaging fathers, toxic stress and language acquisition.

This work to improve early learning extends to the broader community. The Center has partnered with local colleges and universities to offer paid internships for candidates in early childhood teacher training programs, to provide them with hands-

on experiences with curriculum development, parent engagement and best teaching practices to boost the supply of qualified early childhood educators in New Haven. The Center also offers teacher training and professional development opportunities for early childhood educators working in other settings. Friends Center for Children is also working to build community awareness of the value of early learning.

In keeping with its Quaker commitments to equity and inclusion, Friends Center for Children serves a racially, ethnically, socio-economically and religiously-diverse population of children. By serving children from 3 months to age 5, it also offers a seamless continuum of learning that minimizes transitions for young children. By offering full-day, full-year services, it meets the needs of working families for child care. Families from different income levels pay for care on a sliding scale, ranging from no or nominal payment to the full cost of services. To enable it to serve children in a socio-economically integrated setting, Friends Center for Children participates in several publicly-funded programs, including School Readiness, Care 4 Kids and the state-funded Child Day Care centers program, and also raises significant philanthropic funding to provide private financial aid to needy students. Although this variety of public funding sources enables Friends Center for Children to serve many low-income and working class students, the need to work with so many different programs—and to raise private scholarship funds—illustrates the fragmentation and inadequacy of Connecticut's current approach to funding early childhood services. Better integration of early childhood funding streams would enable more programs to serve a diverse mix of students and to provide a seamless continuum of early learning from birth through age 5.

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The information in this profile has been verified by the provider.

Friends Center for Children, Our Program, available at <http://www.friendscenterforchildren.org>.

## II. Connecticut's Achievement Gap Starts Early

### Many of Connecticut's young children are at risk

Connecticut is home to nearly 200,000 children under age 5, including close to 80,000 preschoolers (ages 3-4) and 113,000 infants and toddlers (ages 0-2). While Connecticut's young children are less likely to live in low-income households than their peers nationally, a significant subset of Connecticut's young children face risk factors that impact their school readiness and later school performance. As shown in Figure 9, one-third of Connecticut's children live in low-income families and one in six live in poverty. In many cases, the impact of poverty is compounded by additional risk factors: 70 percent of low-income preschoolers in Connecticut live in single-parent households, 62 percent have parents who have not received a high school diploma and 27 percent have moved residences within the past year. In general, children under 5 years old in Connecticut are less affluent and more racially and ethnically diverse than the overall statewide population.

Figure 5. There are 190,952 children under 5 in Connecticut

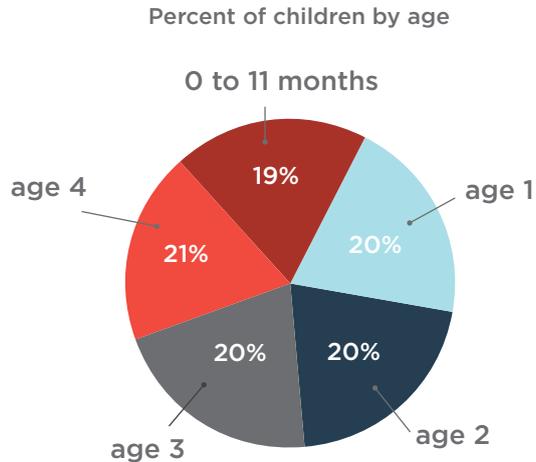
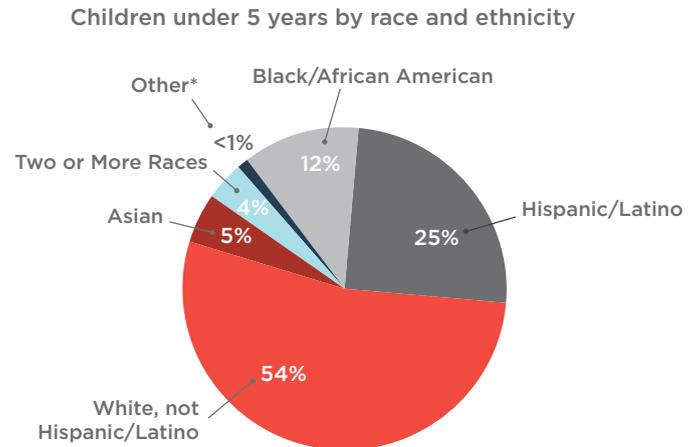


Figure 6. Young children are more diverse (46% minority) than the overall state population (31% minority)



U.S. Census Bureau, 2013 Table PEPSYASEX: Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Single Year of Age and Sex for the United States, States and Puerto Rico Commonwealth: Apr. 1, 2010 to July 1, 2014, available at <http://factfinder.census.gov>. Nat'l Center for Children in Poverty, *Demographics of Poor, Young Children, Connecticut* (2012), available at <http://www.nccp.org/profiles>. U.S. Census Bureau, 2013 Table PEPASR6H: Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Age, Race and Hispanic Origin for the United States and States: Apr. 1, 2010 to July 1, 2014, available at <http://factfinder.census.gov>.

\*Other includes: American Indian and Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander.

**Young, at-risk children live in all parts of the state, but are particularly concentrated in high-poverty communities**

While low-income and at-risk children live in all parts of Connecticut, they are particularly concentrated in high-poverty communities. Priority communities are comprised of schools in which 40 percent or more of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. These districts have a higher percentage of racial and ethnic minority children and a higher concentration of young children living in poverty than the state as a whole. Nearly half of all Connecticut's children under 5 years old live in priority communities. Of all children under 5 years old living in poverty, 74% reside in a priority community.

Figure 7. Almost half of Connecticut's young children live in priority communities

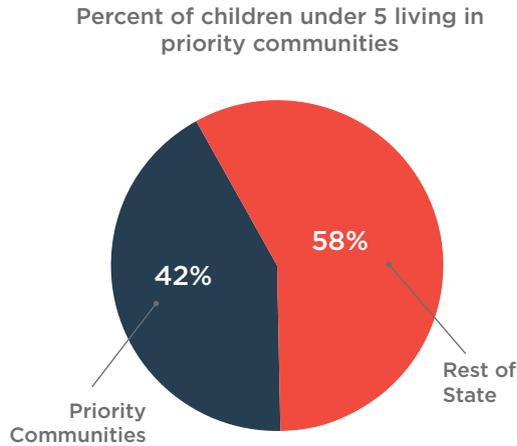
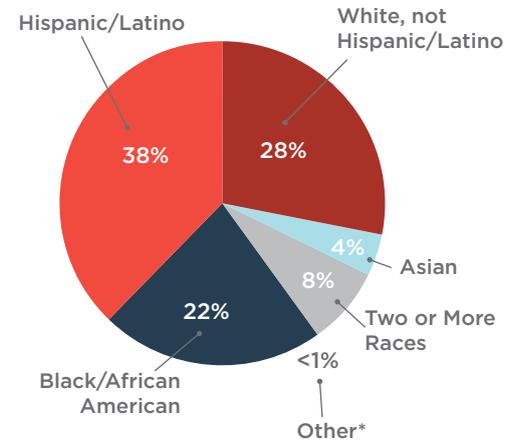


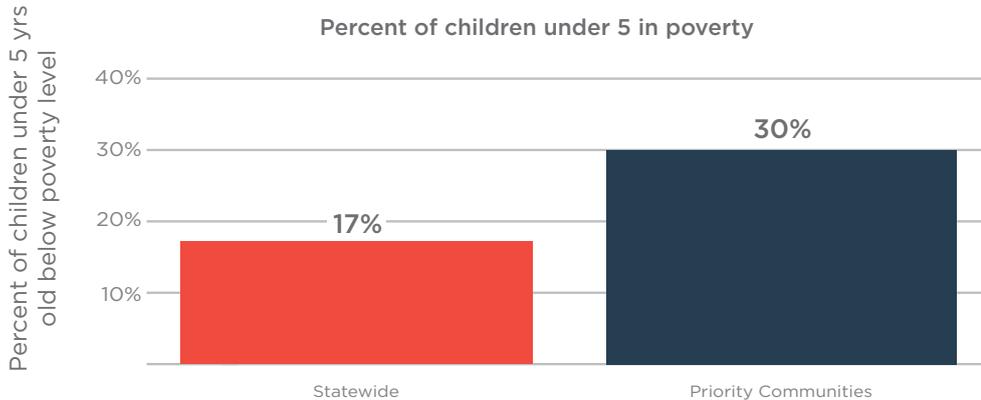
Figure 8. Young children living in poverty are more diverse than their peers statewide

Percent of children under 5 living in priority communities by race and ethnicity



\*Other includes: American Indian and Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander.

Figure 9. Young children in priority communities are more likely to live in poverty than their peers statewide



The majority of Connecticut children attend some form of pre-k, but children in high-poverty communities are less likely to attend preschool than their peers statewide. Preschoolers in Connecticut are served in a variety of public, private and home-based settings, and many of these programs do not receive public funding. Currently, there is no system tracking individual children's experiences across these various settings. As a result, it is difficult to obtain definitive information about how many children attend preschool or the quality of those programs. Parent surveys, however, indicate that most Connecticut children have some type of early childhood education experience prior to kindergarten. As reflected on the table on page 12, in 2012-13, 83 percent of Connecticut parents enrolling children in kindergarten report that their children have attended some form of preschool, but this percentage varies widely between districts. In seven districts, 100 percent of parents report that their children have had preschool experience, while others report less than 50 percent have attended some form of preschool.

This parent-reported data, however, should be interpreted with caution. "Preschool" can mean different things to different parents. Some parents may consider any form of child care preschool, while others may think that preschool refers solely to school-based programs. Moreover, parent reports of preschool attendance do not provide any information about the quality of the programs that children attended. Based on parent-reported data, it is safe to conclude that many Connecticut children attend some form of preschool and that districts with lower rates of preschool attendance are disproportionately high-poverty districts.

Table 1. Although the statewide average for exposure to preschool is 83%, wide disparities exist in Connecticut between low-income children and their more affluent peers

Preschool exposure by districts with highest percent of low-income children

District Name	Student Enrollment, 2012-13	Percent Eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch, 2012-13	Percent of Kindergarteners with Pre-Kindergarten Experience, 2012-13
Bridgeport	20,155	100%	63%
Hartford	21,487	85%	62%
New Britain	10,217	81%	74%
Waterbury	18,389	81%	68%
New London	3,067	79%	66%
New Haven	21,183	78%	72%
Windham	3,189	76%	80%
Norwich	3,791	70%	83%
Meriden	8,153	70%	69%
Ansonia	2,409	67%	71%

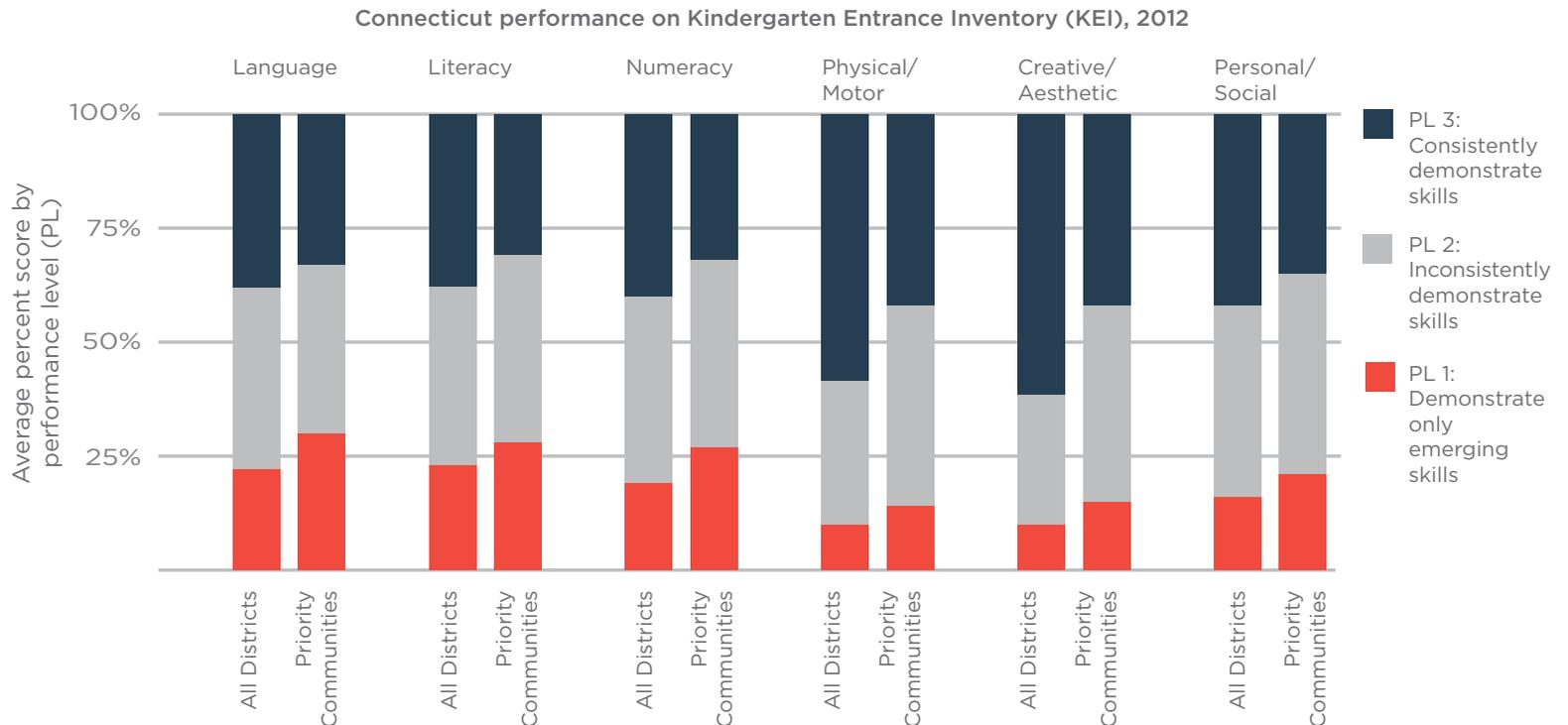
Preschool exposure by districts with lowest percent of low-income children

District Name	Student Enrollment, 2012-13	Percent Eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch, 2012-13	Percent of Kindergarteners with Pre-Kindergarten Experience, 2012-13
New Canaan	4,203	0%	99%
Darien	4,840	1%	94%
Weston	2,419	2%	98%
Wilton	4,289	2%	99%
Easton	1,015	2%	98%
Ridgefield	5,269	3%	89%
Westport	5,795	4%	95%
Redding	1,130	4%	97%
Union	71	4%	86%
Orange	1,243	4%	94%

Conn. Open Data, 2012-2013 Indicators of Educational Need by District, Conn. State Dept. of Educ., available at <https://data.ct.gov>. Conn. Open Data, 2009-2012 Kindergarten Students with Pre-kindergarten Experience by District, Conn. State Dept. of Educ., available at <https://data.ct.gov>.

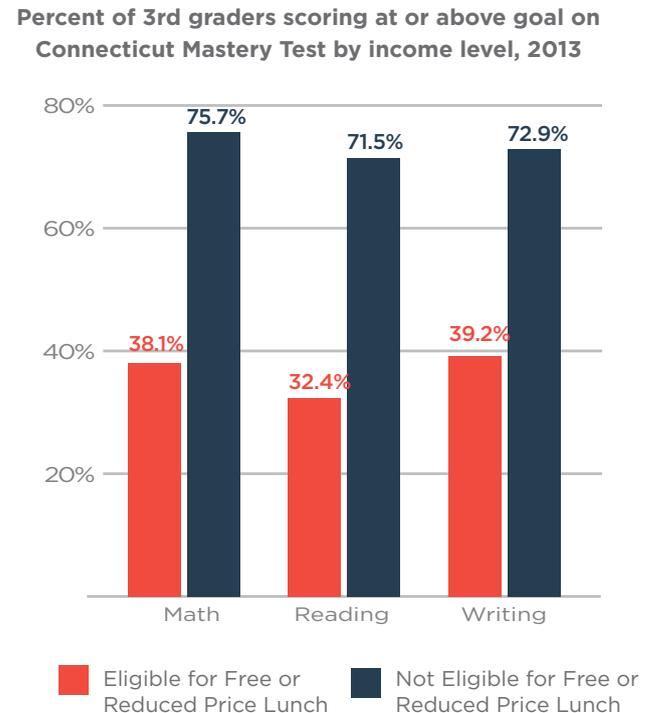
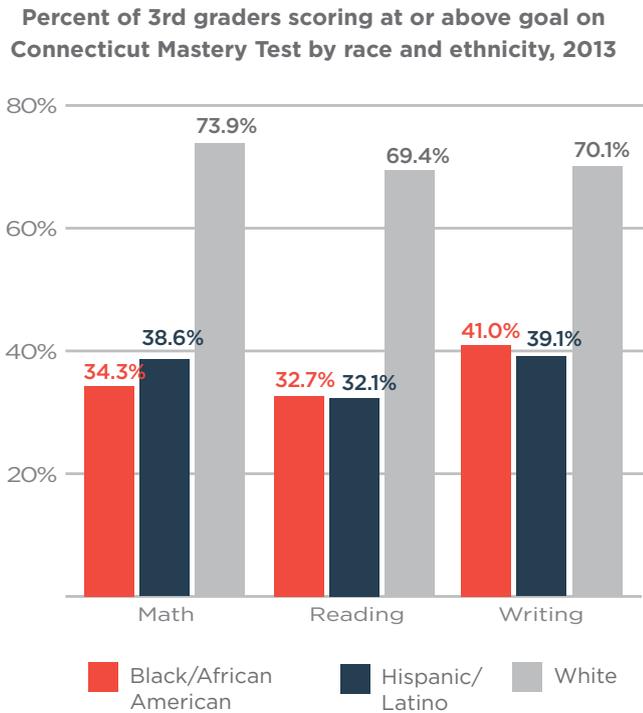
Connecticut uses a Kindergarten Entrance Inventory (KEI) to collect data on children's skills at kindergarten entrance. This data suggests that many Connecticut children are entering kindergarten lacking key skills. As shown in the figure below, in 2012, no more than half of children statewide consistently demonstrated skills in any of the six domains of the KEI (language, literacy, numeracy, physical/motor, creative/aesthetic and personal/social) and children in priority communities demonstrated lower levels of skills, on average, than children in other parts of the state. Nearly one in four children entering kindergarten in priority communities only demonstrate emerging levels of language, literacy and numeracy skills. These disparities play a role in creating the state's K-12 achievement gap, which has been noted as the largest in the nation.

Figure 10. Young children in priority communities are more likely to lack key skills at kindergarten entrance than their peers statewide



Third grade reading scores are one of the most important early learning indicators. The ability to read fluently by third grade is a strong predictor of children’s later educational success. As shown below, in 2013, nearly 57 percent of Connecticut third graders performed at or above goal in reading on the Connecticut Mastery Test—but there are large racial and socio-economic achievement gaps. Nearly 70 percent of white students tested at goal or above, compared to only about 33 percent of Black/African American and 32 percent of Hispanic/Latino students. Gaps by family income were similarly large: nearly 72 percent of non low-income children tested at goal or above, compared to only about 32 percent of low-income children.

Figure 11. Inequitable access to quality early learning contributes to large achievement gaps in third grade



The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Early Reading Proficiency in the United States* (January 29, 2014), available at <http://www.aecf.org>. Conn. State Dept. of Educ., *2013 Data Interaction for Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) 4th Generation*, available at <http://www.cmtreports.com>.

Connecticut adopted the Common Core State Standards in 2010 and first administered the Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBAC) statewide in 2014-2015. For more information on baseline SBAC results, visit [www.sde.ct.gov](http://www.sde.ct.gov).

The ELLI Lab School in Norwalk is a high-quality, language and literacy-focused preschool program created to close the achievement gap. ELLI demonstrates what high-quality programs to support preschoolers' learning look like—as well as how to address the gap between effective language and literacy practices in most Connecticut preschool classrooms.

Located within Stepping Stones Museum for Children in Norwalk, the ELLI Lab School was created through a unique partnership between the Museum and Literacy How, a nationally recognized research-to-practice organization supporting effective literacy strategies in early childhood and the elementary grades.

Four key factors differentiate ELLI from most other preschool programs:

- Every activity that children engage in has a language and literacy outcome
- The program is fully integrated around a yearly theme or big idea
- The classroom environment is an ever-changing teaching and learning tool
- Staff have a deep knowledge of children's early language and literacy development

ELLI is teacher-led and child-powered. This focus is reflected in day-to-day classroom practices, including content-specific and

rich vocabulary, teacher role-playing with children to develop complex language and verbal reasoning skills, explicit and embedded instruction in phonological awareness, extensive use of children's invented spelling, facilitation of STEAM education, regular communication with families and a multifaceted and complex learning environment. ELLI does not use a commercial curriculum; teachers develop their own. Teachers at ELLI are continuously experimenting with new strategies, refining their models, assessing the impact on children's learning and documenting what they are learning.

In creating this ever evolving program, the ELLI staff works closely with Literacy How to develop a program that reflects research-based practices for supporting young children's learning and provides coaching to develop their language and literacy-focused practices. In addition, Literacy How is helping document ELLI's work and lessons learned as part of its research agenda.

ELLI started as a pilot program in 2012 and currently serves up to 21 children at Stepping Stones, as well as a satellite model classroom in the Norwalk Public Schools. The ELLI Lab School at Stepping Stones does not receive state funding, although some parents receive Care 4 Kids subsidies. The model classroom within the Norwalk Public Schools is funded with School Readiness funds. ELLI offers an illustration of what high-quality language and literacy focused early childhood education could look like in Connecticut and a model that the state should seek to expand for more children.

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The information in this profile has been verified by the provider.

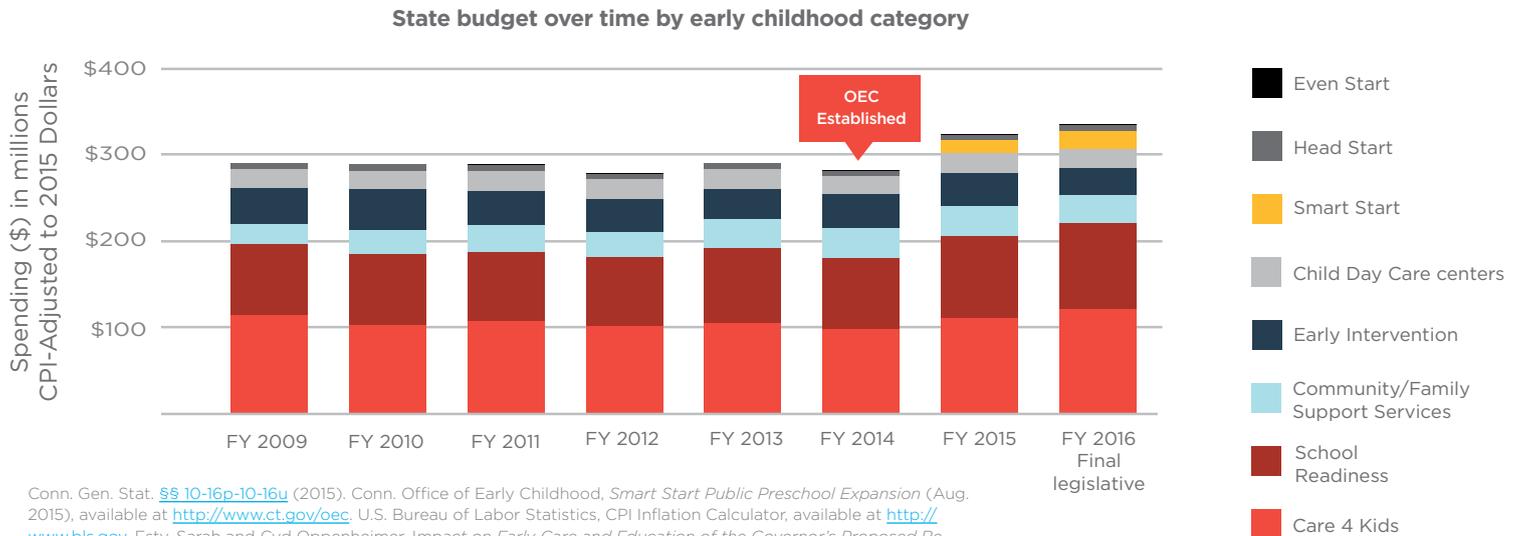
The Early Language and Literacy Initiative (ELLI) Lab School, Stepping Stones Museum, available at <http://www.steppingstonesmuseum.org>.

### III. Connecticut Has Created and Expanded Early Childhood Education Programs

*Connecticut has created several programs to educate young children, but these programs are not integrated into a coherent early learning system*

Connecticut's history of support for early childhood education dates back to the 1960s, when the state created the Child Day Care centers program. In 1997, state legislation created the School Readiness program, Connecticut's largest preschool program. In the 2014 legislative session, the General Assembly formally established the Office of Early Childhood, expanded the School Readiness program and authorized a new program, known as Smart Start, to provide incentives to school districts to offer preschool. While these legislative initiatives have expanded access to preschool in Connecticut, they have also created a complex and confusing patchwork of overlapping pre-k programs, some of which have differing funding levels as well as eligibility and payment requirements for families. Today, Connecticut has several different public programs that support preschool.

Figure 12. Connecticut funds early care and education through multiple programs, services and subsidies



Conn. Gen. Stat. [§§ 10-16p-10-16u](#) (2015). Conn. Office of Early Childhood, *Smart Start Public Preschool Expansion* (Aug. 2015), available at <http://www.ct.gov/oec>. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, CPI Inflation Calculator, available at <http://www.bls.gov>. Esty, Sarah and Cyd Oppenheimer, *Impact on Early Care and Education of the Governor's Proposed Rescissions to the FY12 Budget*, Conn. Voices for Children (Feb. 2012), available at <http://www.ctvoices.org>. Esty, Sarah and Cyd Oppenheimer, *Impact on Early Care and Education of the Governor's Proposed Budget for FY 14-15*, Conn. Voices for Children (Feb. 2013), available at <http://www.ctvoices.org>. Joseph, Edie, et. al, *Impact on Early Care and Education of the Final Budget for Fiscal Years 2014-15*, Conn. Voices for Children (June 2013), available at <http://www.ctvoices.org>. Oppenheimer, Cyd, *Impact on Early Care and Education of the Governor's Rescissions for FY13*, Conn. Voices for Children (Nov. 2012), available at <http://www.ctvoices.org>. Joseph, Edie and Cyd Oppenheimer, *Impact on Early Care and Education of the Final Budget for Fiscal Year 2015*, Conn. Voices for Children (May 2014), available at <http://www.ctvoices.org>. Iverson, Sarah and Cyd Oppenheimer, *Impact of the Appropriations Committee's Proposed FY 16/17 Budget on Early Care and Education*, Conn. Voices for Children (May 2015), available at <http://www.ctvoices.org>. Iverson, Sarah, et al., *Impact on Early Care and Education of the Final Budget for Fiscal Year 16 and 17*, Conn. Voices for Children (July 2015), available at <http://www.ctvoices.org>.

Figure 12 spending levels are from CT Voices for Children reports, which identifies the movement of funds for early care and education between several different agencies using the latest budget. Several line items were reviewed and combined to form these representative categories.

**School Readiness** is Connecticut’s largest preschool program and is comprised of three distinct components that operate very differently. In 2014-15, there were a total of 11,790 School Readiness seats at 328 sites in 68 Priority School Districts and competitive grant municipalities.

- **Priority Communities:** The vast majority of School Readiness funds—86 percent—flow through formula grants to 19 Priority School Districts. These districts receive funds at a set per-child cost rate based on the number of children served and the types of services offered (there are different rates for part-day, school-day and full-day/full-year programs).
- **Competitive Grant Municipalities:** Another 49 communities receive School Readiness funds through a competitive grant process. Communities that have severe needs or are in the lowest 50 towns in the state based on town wealth are eligible to apply for competitive grants. Eligibility is determined for a five-year period. Applications must be submitted jointly by the local school superintendent and mayor (or other chief elected municipal officer). Competitive grant municipalities receiving more than the minimum grant of \$107,000 must provide a minimum of 13 full-day/full-year spaces for children.
- **Quality Grants:** As outlined on page 20, the state awards quality enhancement grants to enable local School Readiness Councils to improve the quality of School Readiness programs. These grants are awarded annually through a competitive request for proposal (RFP) process. The Councils are jointly appointed by the local school superintendent and mayor and are comprised of parents, a librarian, a representative of a community health care provider and representatives of local early childhood programs and other organizations that serve young children. The superintendent and mayor, or their designees, are also members of the Council.

Table 2. Connecticut provided \$81 million in 2015 towards publicly-funded pre-k seats in low-income communities

School Readiness funding for priority communities, FY15

Priority Communities	Grant Amount	Priority Communities	Grant Amount	Priority Communities	Grant Amount
Ansonia	\$1,175,425	Meriden	\$3,610,393	Putnam	\$465,932
Bloomfield	\$654,331	Middletown	\$2,076,926	Stamford	\$4,131,706
Bridgeport	\$12,602,099	New Britain	\$4,813,742	Waterbury	\$10,076,124
Bristol	\$2,827,671	New Haven	\$8,052,091	West Haven	\$1,930,812
Danbury	\$3,361,354	New London	\$1,384,249	Windham	\$1,483,798
East Hartford	\$2,792,800	Norwalk	\$5,034,155	<b>Total (Pre-CHEFA)*</b>	<b>\$80,853,135</b>
Hartford	\$12,197,257	Norwich	\$2,182,270		

Conn. Office of Early Childhood, *2014 Preschool Development Grants Expansion Grant Application* (Oct. 2014), available at <http://www.ct.gov/oec>; Conn. Office of Early Childhood, *School Readiness Grant Program Application for Competitive School Readiness Municipalities RFP 054* (May 2015), available at <http://www.ct.gov/oec>; Conn. Office of Early Childhood, *Overview of the School Readiness Program* (2015), available at <http://www.ct.gov/oec>.

\*CHEFA refers to the Connecticut Health and Educational Facilities Authority (CHEFA). Derby’s status recently changed from a competitive grant town to priority community.

Table 3. Connecticut provided an additional \$10 million in 2015 for publicly-funded pre-k seats awarded through competitive grants  
 School Readiness funding for competitive grant municipalities, FY15

Competitive Grant Municipalities	Grant Amount	Competitive Grant Municipalities	Grant Amount	Competitive Grant Municipalities	Grant Amount
Andover	\$113,400	Killingly	\$379,500	Thompson	\$111,825
Ashford	\$113,400	Lebanon	\$132,300	Torrington	\$334,702
Beacon Falls	\$107,000	Ledyard	\$249,559	Vernon	\$348,960
Branford	\$118,346	Lisbon	\$113,400	Voluntown	\$184,275
Brooklyn	\$113,400	Manchester	\$356,730	West Hartford*	\$298,274
Canterbury	\$179,550	Mansfield	\$111,321	Winchester	\$263,377
Chaplin	\$119,700	Milford	\$355,985	Windsor	\$262,022
Colchester	\$119,732	Naugatuck	\$315,560	Windsor Locks	\$241,800
Coventry	\$132,300	North Canaan	\$141,104	Wolcott	\$171,449
Derby	\$118,346	Plainfield	\$163,863	<b>Total</b>	<b>\$9,761,344</b>
East Haven	\$335,790	Plainville	\$201,763		
Eastford	\$107,000	Plymouth	\$129,182		
Ellington	\$115,007	Scotland	\$113,400		
Enfield	\$241,243	Seymour	\$118,346		
Greenwich	\$274,622	Shelton	\$295,071		
Griswold	\$278,261	Sprague	\$141,750		
Groton	\$396,410	Stafford	\$115,353		
Hamden	\$457,685	Sterling	\$113,400		
Hampton	\$113,400	Stratford	\$200,246		
Hebron	\$113,400	Thomaston	\$128,835		

Conn. Office of Early Childhood, *Overview of the School Readiness Program* (2015), available at <http://www.ct.gov/oec>.

\*Additional \$88,000 funded through Priority School Districts. See Conn. Gen. Stat. §10-266p (2015).

School Readiness programs serve both 3- and 4-year-olds. There is no family income requirement to participate in School Readiness programs, but at least 60 percent of children served must be from families with incomes below 75 percent of the state median income. School Readiness services are not free for families—parents pay a subsidized tuition rate according to an income-based sliding scale.

*School Readiness Councils* are a central feature of Connecticut’s School Readiness program. In both Priority Districts and competitive grant municipalities, School Readiness Councils are responsible for identifying and contracting with local early care and education providers—including public schools, community-based child care providers and Head Start—to provide School Readiness spaces. They also develop the community’s plan and application for quality enhancement grants and, in competitive grant municipalities, the application for School Readiness funding. This unique local governance model is designed to ensure that School Readiness programs are responsive to local needs and encourages local communities to offer preschool in community-based settings as well as public schools.

All providers that receive School Readiness funds must receive accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) within 3 years of receiving funds. NAEYC is a national organization that offers a voluntary accreditation system for early childhood education programs. NAEYC Accreditation assesses program performance against NAEYC’s Early Childhood Program Standards in several distinct areas: relationships, curriculum, teaching, assessment of child progress, health, teachers, families, community relationships, physical environment as well as leadership and management. To become NAEYC accredited, programs must go through a four-step process that includes a program self-assessment and a site visit from NAEYC assessors. Once awarded, NAEYC Accreditation lasts for a period of 5 years. Providers that receive School Readiness funds must either already be accredited by NAEYC or obtain NAEYC Accreditation within three years.

**Federal Preschool Development Grant:** In November 2014, the Office of Early Childhood was awarded nearly \$12.5 million for the first year of a four-year Federal Preschool Development Grant to expand high-quality preschool in Connecticut. The grant will expand access to high-quality state-funded preschool programs for 428 children and improve the quality of these programs for another 284, for a total of 712 children who are at or below 200 percent of the Federal poverty guidelines in 14 high-need communities. The 14 communities are Bridgeport, Derby, East Haven, Griswold, Groton, Hamden, Hebron, Killingly, Manchester, Naugatuck, Seymour, Torrington, Vernon, and Wolcott.

**Child Day Care Centers** (formerly known as DSS Centers or state-funded centers) is a separate funding stream that provides state-funded early care and education services for infants, toddlers and preschoolers from families with incomes below 75 percent of the state median income, as well as before and after-school care for school-aged children. Parents pay a subsidized tuition rate, according to an income-based sliding scale. All providers that receive Child Day Care Center funds must be NAEYC accredited or on track to earn accreditation within 3 years. In 2014-15, there were 2,570 preschool spaces and 368 preschool wraparound spaces at 103 child centers.

**Head Start** is a federally-funded program that provides comprehensive child development and early education services for preschoolers from families living below the poverty line. Early Head Start, a smaller program within Head Start, serves infants, toddlers and pregnant women. Twenty-three Connecticut agencies, located in 17 towns, receive Head Start grants from the federal government and serve nearly 5,700 children ages 3 to 5 years. In addition to the federally-funded seats, the State of Connecticut also funds 375 Head Start seats. By federal law, Head Start services are free for eligible children and families. Head Start programs must meet federal Head Start Program Standards and receive regular monitoring from the federal Department of Health and Human Services.

**Care 4 Kids** is Connecticut's child care subsidy grant that enables low-income parents to work. Parents with incomes up to 50 percent of the state median income, who are working or participating in work-related training, may obtain a child care voucher from Care 4 Kids. Care 4 Kids vouchers may be used at any child care provider, including unlicensed family, friend and neighbor care; licensed family care homes; and licensed child care centers. The voucher covers a portion of the cost of care and parents pay a co-pay, according to an income-based sliding scale. On average, 19,819 child care vouchers/subsidies are issued monthly through the program.

**Smart Start**, a new program created in the 2014 legislative session, provides grants to local school boards to support the capital and operational costs of pre-k programs. In fiscal year 2015, the first year of the program, only capital funds were available. Districts may receive up to \$75,000 per preschool classroom for capital costs to retrofit existing classrooms for preschool students. In subsequent years, districts may receive up to \$5,000 per child for operating costs, up to a maximum of \$75,000 per classroom or \$300,000 per town. There are no income eligibility requirements for children, but at least 50 percent of children must be from families who meet income eligibility criteria for free or reduced price lunch, or 60 percent from families with income below 75 percent of state median income. Districts may impose the Office of Early Childhood's sliding fee scale for parents, but it is not required. Smart Start funded programs must be NAEYC accredited or earn NAEYC Accreditation within three years. All classes must be taught by a certified teacher employed by the local school board. In the program's first year, only 22 of 123 eligible school districts applied for Smart Start funding, including Ansonia, Bridgeport, Clinton, Coventry, East Hartford, East Haven, Enfield, Killingly, Norwich, Plainfield, Stamford, Wallingford, West Hartford and Windsor, enabling 416 additional children to attend a high-quality preschool.

Conn. Office of Early Childhood, *Child Day Care Contracted Programs* (June 2015), available at <http://www.ct.gov/oec>. Feldlaufer, Harriet, *Connecticut Administered State-Funded Program General Policy B-01*, Conn. Office of Early Childhood (Apr. 2015), available at <http://www.ct.gov/oec>. Conn. Office of Early Childhood, *Overview of Early Childhood Services in Connecticut: Office of Early Childhood & Other Early Childhood Partners* (June 2015), available at <http://www.ct.gov/oec>. Office of Head Start, *Head Start Program Directory: Program Search Results for All Cities with Programs in Connecticut*, U.S. Dep't of Health & Human Serv. Admin. for Children & Families (2015), available at <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc>. Nat'l Inst. for Early Educ., *The State of Preschool 2014 State Preschool Yearbook: Connecticut* (2015), available at <http://nieer.org>. 42 U.S.C. § 9843a (2010). Conn. Care 4 Kids, *Income Guidelines: State Median Income (SMI) Guidelines by Family Size*, Conn. Office of Early Childhood (Jul. 2015), available at <http://www.ctcare4kids.com>. Conn. Office of Early Childhood, *Smart Start Public Preschool Expansion* (Aug. 2015), available at <http://www.ct.gov/oec>. 2014 Conn. [Pub. Acts 14-41](#) (Reg. Sess.). 2015 Conn. [Pub. Acts 15-134](#) (Reg. Sess.).

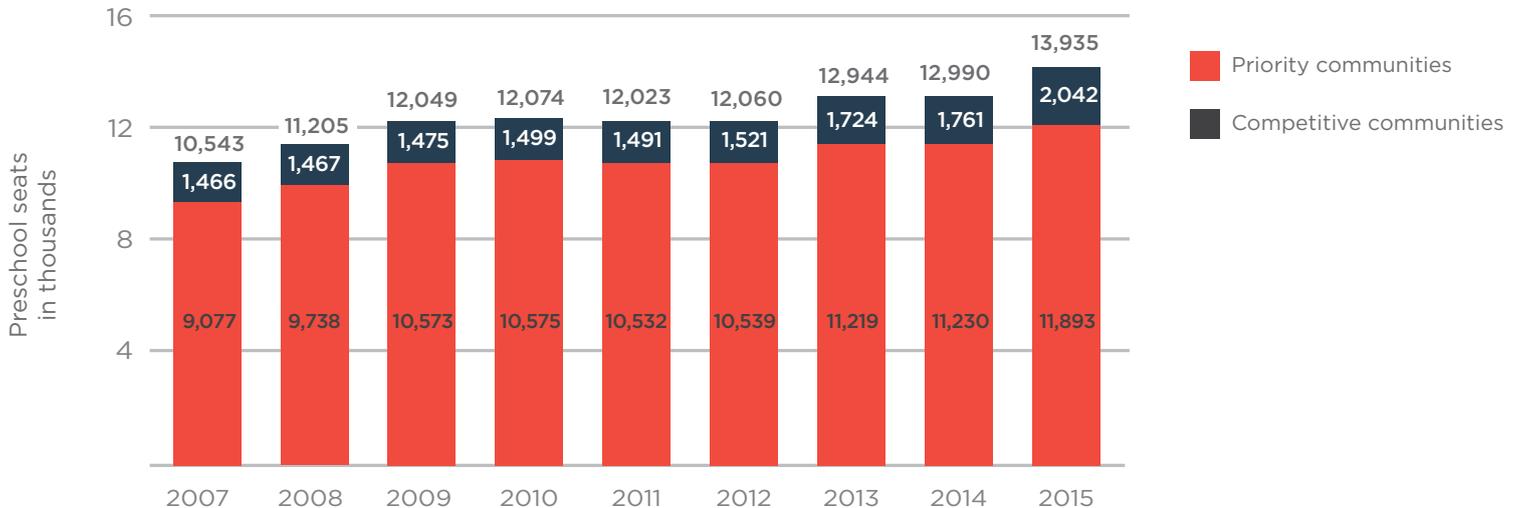
**Interdistrict Magnet Schools** were created in Connecticut to encourage racial and economic integration by attracting racially and economically diverse families to urban schools. Connecticut has 85 magnet schools, 34 of which offer pre-k funded through the State Department of Education. The majority of these programs are located in New Haven and Hartford. Magnet school pre-k programs do not have income eligibility criteria and are typically free for parents. Per recently passed legislation, preschool magnet programs must obtain NAEYC Accreditation by 2017-18.

**Charter schools** in Connecticut may offer pre-k if it is included in their charter. As of 2015-16, seven Connecticut charter schools, including six state-approved charter schools and one local charter school, currently offer pre-k and are funded through the State Department of Education. Charter school pre-k programs do not have income eligibility criteria and are tuition-free for parents. Per recently passed legislation, charter schools currently offering preschool must obtain NAEYC Accreditation by 2017-18.

### *Connecticut has expanded access to early childhood programs*

Over the past several years, Connecticut has expanded access to preschool primarily through increased investments in the School Readiness program. From 2007-2015, the number of children served in School Readiness programs grew by more than 30 percent.

Figure 13. The number of School Readiness seats has increased 32% since 2007  
Number of School Readiness preschool seats by community type, 2007-2015



Conn. Open Data, *Interdistrict Magnets* (Feb. 2015), Conn. State Dept. of Educ., available at <https://data.ct.gov>. Conn. State Bd. of Educ., *Charter School Enrollments 2015-2016*, Conn. State Dept. of Educ. (August 4, 2015), available by inquiry at <http://www.sde.ct.gov>. Conn. Office of Early Childhood, *Preschool Development Grants Expansion Grant Application* (2014), available at <http://www.ct.gov/oec>.

According to research by Connecticut Voices for Children, 32,741 Connecticut preschoolers received state subsidies for early care and education programs in 2013, including children receiving Care 4 Kids subsidies. Excluding children receiving only Care 4 Kids subsidies, which are contingent on parents' work status and are not subject to the same quality standards as other state-funded programs, 28,079\* Connecticut 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled in publicly-subsidized preschool in 2013. This translates into enough seats to serve 82 percent of the 40,170 Connecticut 3- and 4-year-olds living in families with incomes below 75 percent of the state median.

“Low-income” is defined as family income below 75 percent of the state median income (SMI). This definition is used by most of the state’s early childhood programs—including Care 4 Kids, state-funded centers, and School Readiness programs, and is different from the definition commonly used by K-12 schools. In K-12, children are identified as low-income if they are eligible for free and reduced price lunch. This requires a family income below 185% of the Federal poverty guidelines, which in Connecticut is lower than 75 percent of the state median income. In the 2015-16 school year, 75 percent of the state median income in Connecticut is \$66,902 for a family of three. The threshold for free and reduced price lunch, in contrast, is \$37,167 for a family of three.

Not all children served in publicly-subsidized programs are low-income. Charter and magnet preschool programs admit children without income eligibility criteria and School Readiness programs are allowed to serve up to 40 percent non low-income children. This means that, even though the state funds enough seats to serve 82 percent of low-income 3- and 4-year-olds, the percentage of low-income 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled in these programs is actually lower.

Since most state-funded preschool programs focus on 3- and 4-year-olds, the percentage of low-income infants and toddlers receiving subsidized early care and education services is less than 16 percent.

Despite the state’s many early childhood education programs, and the progress made in expanding access in recent years, a significant number of low-income children continue to lack access to early childhood education. Moreover, Connecticut’s early childhood programs are not integrated into a single, coherent system.

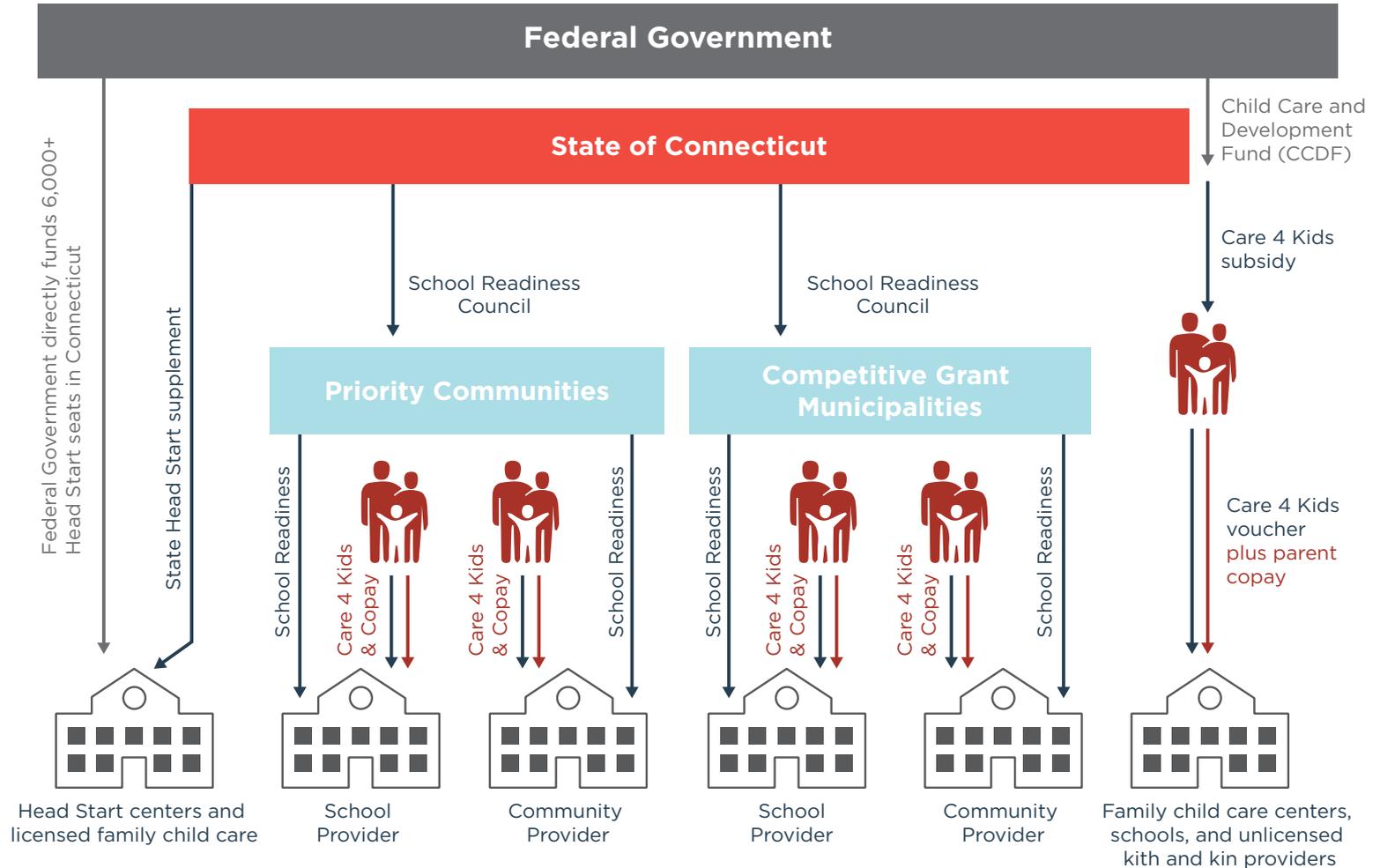
Sarah Iverson & Cyd Oppenheimer, *Conn. Early Care & Education Progress Report Appendices 2014: Calculation 2 Unduplicated Number of Preschoolers Receiving Some Form of State-Subsidized Early Care and Education*, Conn. Voices for Children (May 2015), available at <http://www.ctvoices.org>; Feldlaufer, Harriet, *FY 2015-2016 State Median Income Standards*, Conn. Office of Early Childhood (June 2015), available at <http://www.ct.gov/oec>; U.S. Dept. of Agric., *Income Eligibility Guidelines: SY 2015-2016*, 80 Fed. Register (Mar. 2015), available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/income-eligibility-guidelines>. Sarah Iverson & Cyd Oppenheimer, *Conn. Early Care & Education Progress Report Appendices 2014: Calculation 1: Unduplicated Number of Infants/Toddlers Receiving Some Form of State-Subsidized Early Care and Education*, Conn. Voices for Children (May 2015), available at <http://www.ctvoices.org>.

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\*28,079 is the unduplicated number of preschoolers receiving some form of state-subsidized early care and education excluding children receiving only Care 4 Kids subsidies calculated by author.

Figure 14. Early childhood funding in Connecticut is complex and difficult to navigate

Illustrative diagram of how funding flows to early childhood programs and providers in Connecticut\*



U.S. Dep't of Health and Human Serv., 2014 Head Start Program Facts, available at <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc>.

\*Child Day Care centers (CDCs) are not reflected in this diagram. Funding for CDCs comes from federal grants, state funds and parent co-pays.

## ELM CITY MONTESSORI SCHOOL

Elm City Montessori School (ECMS) is a New Haven local charter school that plans to serve 113 children ages 3-8 in 2015-2016. ECMS emerged from the work of a group of New Haven parents who, while trying to navigate New Haven's public preschool options for their children, began exploring educational models that offered the type of early education they sought. They were introduced to three public Montessori schools in Hartford and, impressed by their approach and results, began organizing to bring a public Montessori to New Haven. In 2013, these parents, together with local educators and community leaders, crafted the vision for a public Montessori school and applied for a charter from the New Haven Board of Education and State Board of Education. In August 2014, Elm City Montessori School opened as Connecticut's only existing local charter school and New Haven's first public Montessori option. Preschool and family engagement are core elements of the ECMS model. The school operates a 10-hour school day, from 7:30 AM to 5:30 PM and implements a full-day Montessori program.

The Montessori approach emphasizes children's independence and natural development. To support children's independent learning, Montessori programs place particular emphasis on a carefully prepared learning environment. Specialized hands-on learning materials and thoughtfully-crafted routines provide a framework that allows children freedom to explore and learn at their own paces. Children's days are structured around uninterrupted blocks of work time in which they may choose to work on a particular activity from a range of options. Students learn in mixed-aged classrooms and communally eat meals and snacks which they help to prepare. Montessori teachers have

specialized training in the Montessori environment and techniques. All Elm City teachers have completed Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) training.

Like any new school, ECMS has encountered challenges. As Connecticut's only local charter school, it has been something of a guinea pig for the state's revised charter law and its experience has identified ambiguities in the legislation—including questions about how ECMS should receive funding for preschool students. Currently, the school does not receive specific preschool funding from the state and is not eligible to receive School Readiness funding. As a result, ECMS is not required to charge a parent co-pay.

Despite these challenges, ECMS had a successful first year, with engaged parents and a long student waiting list. The school is planning to add additional grades each year to eventually reach more than 350 students in grades pre-k through 8. Elm City Montessori School demonstrates the innovation and unique models that charter schools can bring to preschool in Connecticut—as well as some of the challenges that such programs currently face.

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The information in this profile has been verified by the provider.

Elm City Montessori School, About Us, available at <http://elmcitymontessori.org>.

## IV. Connecticut is making progress toward a coordinated early childhood education system, but still has work to do

Early childhood leaders and policymakers in Connecticut recognize a need to better integrate the state's fragmented early childhood programs into a more coherent system for children, families and providers. This served as the catalyst to the 2014 legislation establishing the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) as a distinct agency within state government. Governor Dannel P. Malloy created the OEC by executive order in 2013.

The Office of Early Childhood brought most of Connecticut's early childhood programs, which were previously under the purview of several different agencies, together under one organization explicitly focused on promoting the education, health, development and well-being of Connecticut young children and their families. OEC now oversees the School Readiness program, Child Day Care centers, Care 4 Kids subsidy, Birth to Three program, home visiting programs as well as the state's Head Start supplement and collaboration activities. It also assumed responsibility for early childhood workforce initiatives previously administered by Connecticut Charts-A-Course, as well as child care licensure, regulation and inspection functions previously housed in the Department of Public Health.

Bringing these functions together in one agency creates opportunities to increase coordination and alignment across programs and policies. Establishing a dedicated agency and appointing a Commissioner of Early Childhood also raises the profile of early childhood issues in Connecticut. The Office of Early Childhood is not, however, in itself, an early childhood system. Creating the office was only the first step toward building an integrated early childhood system.

National early childhood organizations have identified several essential components for an integrated early learning system:

- Early learning standards
- Tiered quality standards for early childhood providers that are common across programs, funding streams and types of settings
- An integrated statewide early childhood data system
- Kindergarten entrance assessment
- Workforce development systems and supports
- Integrated early childhood funding mechanisms that reflect the costs of quality programs
- Coordinated enrollment processes for families

Connecticut Voices for Children has also called for Connecticut to work towards a system that contains these components.

Table 4. Connecticut is making progress in building early childhood systems infrastructure

 Fully in place, all systems go    
  Systems partially in place but still under development    
  System elements nascent or non-existent

Component	Status	Additional Details
Early Learning Standards		Connecticut has established the Early Learning and Development Standards.
Quality Rating & Improvement System (QRIS)		Connecticut does not currently have a Quality Rating & Improvement System (QRIS). The OEC is working to build a Quality Improvement System (QIS) that prioritizes support for improvement over rating programs.
Integrated data system		Data on early childhood education (ECE) programs is currently housed in multiple systems that sometimes contradict. The General Assembly has charged the state with creating an integrated ECE data system, which is currently underway.
Kindergarten Entrance Inventory		Connecticut currently uses the Kindergarten Entrance Inventory to assess children's skills/knowledge at kindergarten entrance and is participating in a 7-state consortium to develop enhanced kindergarten entrance inventory that will be piloted in Connecticut during the 2016-17 school year.
Workforce development systems		Connecticut has some components of workforce infrastructure at varying stages of development: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connecticut has workforce competencies and a career ladder. The Core Knowledge and Competency Framework are early childhood core competencies specific to the early childhood workforce and are in final stages of edit.</li> <li>• Connecticut has a workforce registry that is open to all early educators but mandatory only for those in publicly-funded programs.</li> <li>• Connecticut offers scholarships for early educators pursuing higher education but not compensation supplements or incentives.</li> <li>• Connecticut is working on a training approval board and its professional development infrastructure is under renovation.</li> </ul>
Integrated funding		Connecticut has multiple, fragmented funding streams that are not integrated.
Coordinated enrollment		Connecticut lacks coordinated enrollment: Child Day Care centers, magnets, charters, School Readiness and Care 4 Kids all have separate enrollment mechanisms.

Connecticut currently has strong **early learning standards** and is working to build or strengthen other key early childhood system components:

- **Integrated statewide data system:** Integrated early childhood data systems enable states to know who is being served in early childhood programs, informing policy and investment decisions. Connecticut currently tracks data on children’s participation in early childhood programs through The Public School Information System (PSIS). The system tracks data on children enrolled in preschool in public schools. The systems assigns children a unique student identifier, or SASID, which is intended to allow the state to track children’s participation across early learning programs and into K-12 schools. In 2013, the State Bond Commission approved \$6 million from the Information Technology Capital Investment Program to fund the development of an Early Childhood Information System. The 2014 legislation establishing the Office of Early Childhood charged the office with creating a unified statewide early childhood data system linking data previously housed in various data systems and other agencies.
- **Kindergarten Entrance Inventory (KEI):** A well-designed, developmentally appropriate kindergarten entrance assessment provides information to policymakers, parents and providers about early learning programs and helps inform instruction in kindergarten. Legislation passed in 2007 required the Connecticut Department of Education to develop a statewide, developmentally appropriate kindergarten entrance assessment, now known as the Kindergarten Entrance Inventory, that is currently administered by all districts in the state. Connecticut is participating in a 7-state consortium that received federal funding to create a new, common version. The new inventory, which will improve on the current KEI, will be field-tested in 2016 and implemented statewide in 2017.
- **Workforce development systems:** Workforce development systems support early childhood educators in developing their knowledge and skills and ensure qualified educators for early childhood programs. Connecticut has a draft of early childhood educator competencies, a career ladder and a workforce registry. The registry has been transitioned to the Office of Early Childhood. Connecticut is also in the process of reconceptualizing its early childhood educator competencies and career ladder to align with the state’s early learning standards. Many of these components are currently in transition, and the state recently passed legislation supporting these efforts. Under the leadership of Connecticut-Charts-A-Course, Connecticut developed a career ladder and a workforce registry. This registry has been transitioned to the Office of Early Childhood. Connecticut is also in the process of reconceptualizing its early childhood educator competencies to reach a broader early childhood workforce that is inclusive of, but is not limited to, educators. Connecticut provides scholarships for bachelor’s and associate’s degree coursework and funds professional development through quality enhancement grants to School Readiness Councils and

- the Accreditation Facilitation Project, but there is no statewide professional development infrastructure or state approval for training providers.

The state requires providers that receive School Readiness, Child Day Care center, or Smart Start funds to obtain NAEYC Accreditation. The state recently passed legislation requiring local or regional boards of education and regional education service centers operating preschool magnet programs and charter schools to obtain NAEYC Accreditation by 2017-18. Connecticut does not, however, have tiered quality standards across all early childhood programs and providers, nor does the state have integrated funding or coordinated enrollment processes for early childhood programs.

In summer 2014, the Office of Early Childhood issued a request for proposals (RFP) for a consultant to undertake a comprehensive review of Connecticut's early childhood programs. This consultant will be tasked with developing recommendations to restructure both the Office and the programs that it operates in order to create a more integrated early childhood education system for Connecticut children and families. This analysis is intended to identify areas of inefficiency, duplication and gaps in existing programs, and enable the Office to develop a strategy to integrate currently fragmented early childhood programs.

***Teacher qualifications vary widely across early childhood settings, but Connecticut is working to improve the qualifications of pre-k teachers in state-funded programs***

There are more than 16,000 early childhood educators in Connecticut working in various settings including family care homes, center-based child care and public schools. In Connecticut's fragmented early childhood system, teacher qualifications vary widely across settings and programs. Licensure regulations require lead teachers in licensed child care centers to have a child development associate (CDA) credential, whereas family care providers in home-based care are not required to have a high school diploma or GED.

Legislation passed in 2005, and subsequently amended in 2015, requires all teachers in state-funded early childhood programs (School Readiness, Child Day Care centers and state-funded Head Start) to hold a bachelor's degree and early childhood credential by 2020. Half of teachers must meet the requirement by 2017 and the other half must hold an associate's degree with a concentration in early childhood. The most recent report shows that 41 percent of teachers in publicly-funded pre-k programs had a bachelor's degree or higher. Recently passed legislation requires the Office of Early Childhood to develop a plan that helps program providers implement stricter staff qualifications already required by law.

2015 Conn. [Pub. Acts 15-134](#) (Reg. Sess.); U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Employment Statistics Query System*, available at <http://data.bls.gov>; Conn. Gen. Stat. §10-16p (2015). Conn. Charts-A-Course, *RBA 2011 Submission from 2008-2010 Data Performance Measure*

28 2 Title of Graph: *Qualifications of Teachers in Publicly Funded Centers, Comparison 2008-2010*, Conn. Office of Early Childhood (Jan. 2011), available at <http://3xa3sn2xtr6117bb6o2m6zwf8ea.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/files/2011/02/teacher-data.pdf>

## *Cultivating diverse preparation pathways can help Connecticut meet demand for qualified pre-k teachers*

Connecticut offers two distinct options for early childhood educators to meet increased credential requirements:

- **Approved teacher preparation program and certification:** Preschool teachers may earn a teacher certification with an endorsement in early childhood education by completing a teacher preparation program approved by the Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE).
- **Early Childhood Teacher Credential Individual Review Route (ECTC):** Teachers may earn an ECTC by completing a bachelor's degree with a concentration in early childhood from a program approved by the Office of Early Childhood.

Teachers can meet these requirements by completing a bachelor's degree in any field and earning 12 credits or more in early childhood or child development. As of 2017, 50 percent or more of staff will need to have one of the following: an appropriate early childhood certification endorsement; a bachelor's degree with an early childhood concentration from the Office of Early Childhood's approved list; or a bachelor's degree in any field plus 12 credits or more in early childhood or child development and the ECTC. By 2020, 100 percent of educators must meet these requirements.

These policies were designed to ensure that early childhood educators working in state-funded programs have the early childhood training they need to be effective preschool teachers. But existing pathways may not be sufficient to meet the state's need for qualified teachers or the training needs of current and prospective early childhood educators in Connecticut. The early childhood teaching workforce is diverse, including individuals with varied educational backgrounds, work and life experiences. These diverse early childhood educators all need the same knowledge and skills to work effectively with young children, but they may need different pathways and support to obtain those skills. An experienced early childhood educator with a child development associate credential, for example, needs different kinds of support than a recent college graduate with a degree in a field other than early childhood, while an experienced elementary school teacher who wants to work with preschoolers needs different training.

The state's current policies do not support the range of diverse pathways to meet these various needs. The state has invested in scholarships to help existing early childhood workers earn associate's and bachelor's degrees, but it has

not created robust pathways for recent college graduates or professionals from other fields. Connecticut currently offers only one alternative route option for early childhood educators, a non-credit program at Charter Oak College. The program is limited to individuals with prior postsecondary study in human development and at least three years of full-time experience as an early childhood educator.

The absence of more diverse pathways to early childhood certification makes it difficult for the state to meet the need for qualified teachers. This may also prevent individuals who have skills and experience to be effective early childhood educators, but lack the majors specified by the state, from becoming early childhood teachers.

For example, Connecticut's certification policies currently prevent one potential pathway, Teach For America, from placing preschool teachers in Connecticut. Teach For America (TFA) is a nonprofit organization that seeks to improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged students by recruiting and training teachers to work in low-income schools. Teach For America has developed specialized early childhood training for corps members with degrees in a variety of subjects, and places hundreds of corps members in early childhood placements nationwide. A recent independent evaluation by Mathematica Policy Research found that Teach For America corps members had a statistically positive impact on student reading achievement for students in pre-k through 2nd grade compared to other educators in the same schools. Similarly, Connecticut state law does offer a special certification option for teachers who have completed Association Montessori International (AMI) training, which is crucial for enabling Montessori schools to attract and hire qualified teachers. Teachers hired under this credential option however, are still required to complete 12 additional hours of early childhood coursework in order to work in Connecticut.

Moreover, a policy focus on degrees and majors may distract attention from the true goal: developing and attracting a pool of talented individuals from a variety of backgrounds who have the necessary knowledge and skills to work effectively with young children, however they obtained that knowledge.

All Our Kin is a unique non-profit organization focused on improving the quality and sustainability of family child care in Connecticut. All Our Kin's work helps children by improving the quality of family child care services. It helps parents by increasing the supply of child care so that they can work. It also helps providers by enabling them to earn more money and grow as professionals.

All Our Kin offers several programs and services for family child care providers at varying levels of quality and experience:

- The **Tool Kit Licensing** program supports prospective family child care providers, as well as current unlicensed providers, to become licensed. Providers receive support for the licensing process as well as boxes of resources and materials designed to help them complete the application process, meet training requirements, create a safe and appropriate environment for children and support children's learning and development.
- The **All Our Kin Family Child Care Network** enables providers to build community with other providers and access professional development. Participation in the network reduces the sense of isolation that many family care providers feel and fosters providers' sense of themselves as professionals.
- Through the **Educational Consulting** program, master educators visit providers' programs and offer bi-weekly

mentoring and coaching focused on child development and curriculum, to help improve the quality of children's early learning experiences in family child care.

- The **Business Consulting** and **Business Classes** programs help family child care providers learn business and entrepreneurial skills to improve their incomes and financial sustainability of their child care businesses. These services help to increase the rate at which family care providers remain in the profession, supporting access to care for parents and continuity of care experiences for children and also improve the lives of providers themselves

Research by economists at the University of Connecticut found that All Our Kin's Tool Kit program will yield significant benefits for providers, parents, children and the state as a whole. Each provider licensed through the Tool Kit program enables four to five parents to enter the workforce. Providers who participated in the program significantly increased their earnings. Researchers estimate that between 2010-2016 All Our Kin's work will produce \$17 million in additional tax revenues for the state of Connecticut and that every dollar spent by All Our Kin on the Tool Kit program will yield \$15-20 in increased economic activity.

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The information in this profile has been verified by the provider.

All Our Kin, Our Mission, available at <http://allourkin.org>.

## V. Connecticut's approach to early childhood education has both strengths and weaknesses

Over the past 20 years, Connecticut has made real progress in early childhood by creating and expanding multiple programs and is implementing components of an integrated early childhood system. The state's approach has both strengths and weaknesses, and significant work remains to be done.

### *Strengths:*

- **Inclusion of diverse providers:** Connecticut has designed its School Readiness program to include both public schools and community-based early childhood providers, including for-profit and non-profit child care centers, Head Start agencies and nursery schools. This approach allows the state to leverage the capacity and expertise of existing early childhood providers and to offer state-funded preschool in a range of settings that meet varying local and family needs.
- **Full-day and full-year programs:** Delivering preschool through community-based providers also allows Connecticut to offer full-day programs that meet the needs of working families. Roughly two-thirds of School Readiness programs offer a 10-hour day and year-round services. In contrast, many state pre-k programs serve children for only a half-day, while other programs typically serve children for a 6-hour school day and for only 180 days a year.
- **Serving 3- and 4-year-olds:** Unlike pre-k programs in many states, which focus exclusively on 4-year-olds, Connecticut's School Readiness program serves both 3- and 4-year-olds. This is important because research suggests that providing two consecutive years of preschool increases the chances of closing early learning gaps for disadvantaged children.
- **Focus on the whole child:** Connecticut's early childhood programs are designed to address the needs of the whole child and family, including social emotional development, parent involvement, health, nutrition and mental health needs. In recent years, the state has supported several initiatives to address social-emotional development, trauma and mental health in early childhood settings.

- **Strong local leadership in many communities:** Connecticut’s approach to early childhood education invests considerable authority at the local level. Over the past 15 years, the Graustein Memorial Fund has made grants to over 50 “discovery communities” to develop and implement comprehensive local plans to improve early childhood education and results for children ages birth to 8. This approach has built local support, leadership and capacity in many communities.
- **Strong public/private partnerships:** Connecticut has a strong network of private and philanthropic funders who support early childhood education and work together to support both programs and policy changes. Funders through the Connecticut Early Childhood Funders Collaborative, and community advocates like the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance, played a key role in supporting the creation of the Office of Early Childhood.

### Weaknesses

- **Multiple, fragmented programs:** As noted, Connecticut does not have an integrated early childhood system. Instead, it has multiple early childhood programs with differing funding levels, quality standards, eligibility requirements and parental fees. This fragmentation creates inefficiencies and inequities for children, families and providers and makes the system very difficult for parents to navigate.
- **Persistent preschool access gaps:** Although Connecticut has made progress in expanding access to School Readiness programs, publicly-funded preschool programs still serve less than half of all Connecticut preschoolers and less than two-thirds of low-income preschoolers. This means that Connecticut is struggling to provide early interventions to the children that need them the most. It is estimated that across the School Readiness program nearly 9,000 children are in need of a seat—approximately 6,000 children in Priority Districts and 3,000 children in competitive grant municipalities.
- **Limited services for infants and toddlers:** Publicly-funded services for infants and toddlers are especially limited and are available primarily through Care 4 Kids and a small number of infant and toddler seats in Child Day Care centers. Only 16 percent of infants and toddlers from low-income households have accessed publicly-funded early childhood services.
- **Lack of information and access for parents:** In some parts of the state, Connecticut’s fragmented system provides parents with a bewildering array of choices. Families in New Haven, for example, may be eligible for multiple School Readiness programs, Child Day Care centers, magnet schools or charter schools, but the current system does not provide them with assistance in navigating those choices. The Office of Early

- Childhood offers the Connecticut 2-1-1 Child Care site ([www.211childcare.org](http://www.211childcare.org)) as a resource for parents. The state, however, must improve the means of providing families with reliable information regarding the quality of different early childhood options. In addition, differences in eligibility and parent co-pay requirements between programs can exacerbate inequities or create obstacles to parents choosing the program that is best for their child.
- **Lack of emphasis on learning:** Connecticut's early childhood programs emphasize supporting comprehensive child development, not just cognitive skills. The programs, however, may not focus enough attention on key practices needed to support children's learning, language and literacy development, or readiness for school. The School Readiness legislation identifies specific quality requirements for School Readiness programs, including collaboration with other community programs, parent involvement, referrals for health services, nutrition services and referrals for family literacy programs. There are no specific requirements, however, for the quality of curriculum, instruction, or educational programming in School Readiness classrooms. Researchers have identified specific instructional practices and adult/child interactions that support children's learning in early childhood settings. Nationally, exemplary providers, states and the federal Head Start program increasingly seek to promote these practices in publicly-funded preschool programs. Connecticut, however, lags behind these efforts.
- **Incomplete talent strategy:** Connecticut has implemented components of an early childhood workforce system, including teacher competencies, a workforce registry and scholarships for early childhood educators. The state does not, however, have a comprehensive strategy to develop and attract the early childhood talent it needs. Connecticut does not offer a diversity of pathways for individuals to earn the skills and knowledge they need to be effective preschool teachers, nor does it have a clear strategy for ensuring that current teachers have access to high-quality training and job-embedded professional development to continue improving their practice.
- **Lack of a continuous improvement infrastructure:** Connecticut has not established a professional development and data infrastructure to support ongoing, continuous improvement in early childhood programs. The state makes grants to local School Readiness Councils to support quality improvement and provides additional professional development through the Accreditation Facilitation Project. These efforts are not coordinated or informed by statewide analysis of program quality or outcome data.

## WHAT ABOUT INFANTS AND TODDLERS?

This paper is primarily focused on improving preschool access and quality for 3- and 4-year-olds in Connecticut. This focus reflects the robust research demonstrating the positive educational impact of high-quality pre-k programs.

We are highly cognizant that achievement gaps begin developing well before age 3 and that there is a deep and unmet need for infant and toddler services in Connecticut. We believe that efforts to improve access and quality for high-need infants and toddlers are a critical complement to the policies we discuss here. Three strategies are particularly important:

**Do no harm:** Policymakers must ensure that preschool expansion does not come at the expense of infant and toddler services. There is a risk that by expanding preschool primarily in school-based settings, policymakers could undermine the economics of community-based child care providers, leading to a loss of infant and toddler seats. Expanding preschool primarily through community-based providers, however, could create incentives to reduce the number of infant and toddler seats in order to serve more preschoolers. In expanding preschool access, policymakers must exercise caution to avoid both outcomes. In addition, they should seek to ensure that preschool expansion in community-based settings benefits all children in these settings, including infants and toddlers, by providing professional development for both preschool and infant/toddler teachers, or subsidizing costs for center-wide resources such as new technology and equipment or director salaries.

**Expand supports for quality family home care:** Many infants and toddlers in Connecticut are served in family home care settings. Families often choose these settings for infants and toddlers because they prefer the home-like environment and greater flexibility of family home care and because these options tend to be more affordable than center-based infant and toddler care. Since family home care will continue to play a dominant role in serving infants and toddlers for the foreseeable future, policymakers should ensure that preschool investments are accompanied by supports to improve the quality and supply of family home care. Connecticut's All Our Kin (see provider profile) is a national exemplar of these types of services.

**Revisit Care 4 Kids:** Care 4 Kids, Connecticut's version of child care subsidies for working parents, is the primary source of public funding for infant and toddler care. It is challenging, however, for families and providers to access and navigate. Reimbursements to providers are lower than the true costs of infant and toddler care and state funding levels for Care 4 Kids have fluctuated over time. Other organizations have offered recommendations to strengthen Care 4 Kids, which should be incorporated into any statewide reform of early childhood programs.

## VI. High-quality preschool programs in other states provide a roadmap to improve Connecticut's preschool programs

Over the past decade, a growing number of state and locally-funded preschool programs have demonstrated that it is possible for publicly-funded preschool programs to produce demonstrable improvements in young children's learning and skills at school entrance, and that these gains translate into improved student achievement in elementary school. These programs illustrate the potential of pre-k as well as demonstrate the importance of quality to realize that potential. Connecticut's current state-funded preschool programs fail to match the standards and practices found in proven effective programs and, as a result, are unlikely to produce comparable results for children. But the state has an opportunity to learn from effective models in other states.

### *New Jersey's Abbott Pre-K Program*

New Jersey's Abbott Pre-K Program is a full-day, universal pre-k program for 3- and 4-year-old children in 31 high-poverty districts. It was started in 1999 in response to a court order, resulting from the state's long-running *Abbott v. Burke* school finance litigation. Pre-K programs are delivered in both school- and community-based settings, all of which must meet the same quality standards, including:

- Employ teachers with a bachelor's degree and state certification to teach grades pre-k through 3 and pay them comparably with teachers in K-12 public schools
- Have class sizes no larger than 15 students, with one teacher and one assistant teacher in each classroom
- Employ Master Teachers who provide coaching and job-embedded professional development to pre-k teachers
- Use a state-approved, developmentally appropriate preschool curriculum

New Jersey also implemented a system of assessments and data collection to support ongoing, continuous improvement of these pre-k programs. Teachers use developmentally appropriate, authentic assessments to monitor children's learning and progress. School districts that regularly assess classroom quality in both school- and community-based providers use the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), an observational measure of preschool classroom environmental quality. Districts also participate in an annual self-

assessment of program compliance, strengths and weaknesses, which the state reviews with an on-site validation visit every 3 years. New Jersey also engaged an independent evaluator to assess the statewide impact of Abbott Pre-K programs on both quality and student learning. The independent evaluation found that children who participate in this program experience gains in language, literacy and early math skills that are evident at the end of the pre-k year and persist through at least 5th grade, where they are reflected in improved scores on state tests.

### ***Boston Preschool Program***

In 2005, Boston Mayor Tom Menino directed the Boston Public Schools to provide every 4-year-old child in Boston with access to full-day pre-k within 5 years. By 2010, Boston had expanded preschool programs to serve more than 2,100 children in 85 percent of the city's elementary schools. In expanding access to preschool, Boston took several steps to ensure the quality of preschool classrooms:

- Require NAEYC Accreditation and that classes are taught by fully-certified teachers who have obtained bachelor's degrees and are paid on the same salary schedule as the district's K-12 teachers
- Class sizes are no larger than 22 students, with one lead teacher and one teacher assistant
- Boston Preschool classrooms use a common, research-based curriculum selected by the district: Opening the World of Learning, a literacy curriculum and Real Math Building Blocks, a math curriculum
- Boston provides classroom coaching for all preschool teachers, employing one coach for every 10 classrooms, as well as consistent, targeted professional development
- Children are assessed annually in literacy in grades pre-k through 2

Like New Jersey, Boston also implemented systems of assessment and data collection to drive ongoing, continuous improvement and hired an external contractor to conduct biannual assessments of both classroom quality and children's learning. To measure classroom quality, Boston uses three assessments: the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) measures global classroom quality, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) focuses on the quality of teacher-child interactions and the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) tool measures the quality of classroom literacy environments.

An independent evaluation conducted by researchers at Harvard University found that children participating in the Boston Preschool Program made significant gains in vocabulary, early reading and numeracy skills that were

sustained into 3rd grade. Additionally, researchers found that children made modest gains in memory and impulse control. Children who participated in the Boston Preschool Program were more likely to achieve proficiency on the 3rd grade Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) in English Language Arts than non-participants.

### *Lessons for Connecticut*

These examples illustrate the potential of high-quality pre-k programs to improve children's learning in preschool, as well as their later educational outcomes. They also highlight key differences between Connecticut's School Readiness program and these effective models.

Several common quality features contribute to the success of both New Jersey's Abbott Program and the Boston Preschool Program:

- Teachers have a bachelor's degree
- Teachers have specialized training in early childhood education
- Teachers are paid at levels comparable to teachers in K-12 public schools
- Class sizes are no larger than 22 students, with at least two adults in the classroom
- Children receive at least 6 hours a day of preschool programming
- Programs use evidence-based, developmentally appropriate curriculum and aligned assessments
- Teachers receive coaching and job-embedded professional development
- Programs collect and analyze data on both children's learning and classroom quality and use this data to inform professional development and ongoing, continuous improvement
- Programs are funded at levels that support quality: \$12,000 to \$14,900 per child for New Jersey's Abbott Pre-K Program and \$12,000 per child for Boston Preschool Program
- There is a rigorous, independent evaluation of program impacts

Table 5. The most effective programs share common elements, some, but not all, of which are reflected in Connecticut programs

## Presence of best practices in programs by state

Feature	New Jersey Abbott Pre-K	Boston Preschool	Connecticut School Readiness
Teachers have BA and ECE training	√	√	Not yet. (Required 2020)
Teacher pay comparable to K-12 schools	√	√	
Adult:child ratio less than or equal to 2:22	√	√	√
6+ hours per day	√	√	Mix of half, school and full-day
High-quality, evidence-based curriculum	√	√	
Ongoing, job-embedded professional development and coaching	√	√	
Use of data to inform instruction and continuous improvement	√	√	
School-based settings	√	√	√
Community-based settings	√		√
NAEYC Accreditation		√	√
Annual cost per child	\$12,000- \$14,900	\$12,000	\$4,500 half-day \$6,600 school-day \$9,000 full-day

Minervino, Jim, *Lessons from Research and the Classroom: Implementing High-Quality Pre-K that Makes a Difference for Young Children*, Bill & Melinda Gates Found. (Sept. 2014), available at <http://www.gatesfoundation.org>.

As Table 5 shows, Connecticut's School Readiness and Child Day Care programs have some, but not all, of these features. Most notably, Connecticut does not:

- Set standards for the quality of curriculum used by School Readiness programs
- Provide ongoing, job-embedded coaching and professional development for School Readiness teachers
- Regularly collect and analyze data on classroom quality or child learning outcomes to inform continuous improvement
- Ensure that all teachers in state-funded programs have a bachelor's degree and training in early childhood education. A recent report showed that 41 percent of teachers in publicly-funded pre-k programs had a bachelor's degree or higher
- Compensate pre-k teachers on par with K-12 teachers. The typical Connecticut pre-k teacher with a bachelor's degree in a community-based program earns \$34,000 compared to the \$43,000 average starting salary of public school teachers in Connecticut
- Fund pre-k programs at the level needed to meet the same quality standards found in the Abbott Pre-K and Boston Preschool Programs

Connecticut's publicly-funded preschool programs currently lack key features that enable the success of New Jersey's and Boston's preschool programs. By strengthening the quality of its early childhood programs to reflect the practices and characteristics of proven programs, Connecticut can replicate best practices and narrow the achievement gap for children before they begin school. If the state chooses to continue to expand preschool programs without ensuring that they reflect these key features, it will not see the same results.

The following section offers recommendations for Connecticut to improve the quality and results of its preschool programs.

## **VII. Recommendations: How Connecticut Can Replicate the Results of Effective Preschool Programs and Responsibly Expand Access to High-Quality Pre-K**

If we are serious about closing the achievement gap and giving all Connecticut children an excellent education, we must couple the necessary improvements in our K-12 public schools with policies that ensure all Connecticut children, especially our most traditionally disadvantaged students, have the opportunity to attend high-quality preschool. Over the long-term, this will require investing more in early childhood education programs—both to ensure that current programs have the resources they need to recruit skilled teachers and provide high-quality learning experiences for all children as well as expand access to children who currently lack it. All children in Connecticut’s high-poverty communities should be able to attend and benefit from high-quality preschool programs that ensure children enter school on-track to succeed.

Achieving this goal will require both time and resources. Given the state’s current fiscal challenges, new investments in significantly expanding access to early childhood education will be difficult. We can start now, however, by working to maximize our current investments in early childhood education. Connecticut must implement systems and infrastructure to support preschool quality, change policies that create barriers to quality and restructure its existing preschool programs to increase their effectiveness and reduce fragmentation. These changes will not only increase the return on our current investments, but also lay the foundation for greater return on future ones as well.

For this reason, we offer both short and long-term recommendations for improving the quality of and access to early childhood education in Connecticut. All our recommendations are based on a set of common principles that we believe should guide all efforts to improve early childhood policy in Connecticut.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN CONNECTICUT

- 1. Diverse delivery and parent choice:** Publicly-funded early childhood programs should incorporate diverse providers, including district schools, magnet schools, charter schools and community-based providers. Programs should provide parents with the opportunity to choose among multiple providers, the information they need to make good decisions as well as a streamlined and simple process for accessing options, with as few barriers as possible.
- 2. Equity:** Early childhood investments should advance equity by prioritizing disadvantaged students and those at risk of academic difficulties. Given the evidence that neighborhood risk factors and concentrated poverty have a particularly detrimental impact on children's learning and life outcomes, programs should start in the high-poverty districts and communities.
- 3. Quality:** All publicly-funded preschool programs should be held to rigorous quality standards comparable to those in proven effective programs.
- 4. Learning:** The primary goal of publicly-funded preschool is to support children's learning and development to enable children to achieve school readiness across all developmental domains.
- 5. Family engagement and support:** Early childhood programs should respect and support parents' primary role in children's learning and development. Programs should view families as assets and partners, respect diverse family cultures and provide services that meet the needs of working families.
- 6. Continuous improvement and innovation:** Early childhood programs should use data and developmentally appropriate assessments to support continuous, ongoing improvement and growth at the child, classroom, provider, community and statewide levels.
- 7. Continuum of learning and development.** Policymakers, educators and the public must realize that pre-k is not a silver bullet, but instead acts as one piece in a continuum of high-quality learning experiences needed to equip students for success in school and life. Policymakers must be particularly cognizant of how pre-k connects to two adjacent stages in the continuum:
  - Expansion in preschool access must support, rather than undermine, efforts to improve access and quality for infants and toddlers
  - Early learning programs must lead into high-quality early elementary schools that can sustain and build on children's experiences in pre-k. K-12 schools and early childhood providers must work together to align standards, curriculum, assessments and teaching strategies to create a seamless, high-quality learning experience for children.

### Short-term recommendations

**Increase integration of fragmented early childhood programs to create a more equitable and streamlined system for families and providers.** Connecticut’s current system of early learning programs with differing quality standards and child eligibility criteria creates inequities for children and providers, confusion for families and communities as well as inefficiencies for taxpayers. Increasing equity, efficiency and quality requires creating a more integrated system. Developing specific recommendations for restructuring early childhood education programs in Connecticut is beyond the scope of this report. If state budget circumstances continue to pose barriers to moving forward, the state should work together with private philanthropy to form a public-private partnership to support this work. Any redesign of the state’s early childhood system should address the following needs:

- **Create a common route and single point of contact for families to access all programs for which they are eligible:** Currently, families seeking to access early childhood services in Connecticut must independently navigate multiple eligibility criteria and apply to multiple different programs. A family in New Haven, for example, might enter one lottery for a charter school, another for a magnet school and pursue yet another process to access School Readiness seats. The state should work with local School Readiness Councils to create a structure that allows families to complete a single application for all programs for which they may be eligible and assign families to programs based on their eligibility, preferences and available space in high-quality programs.
- **Align seats to distribution of low-income children:** Connecticut is currently undergoing a demographic shift, one in which the number of low-income children and families in the state is increasing and becoming more broadly dispersed. Any restructuring of the state’s early childhood programs should ensure the distribution of seats aligns with the distribution of low-income children in the state. This includes mechanisms for regularly redistributing seats within the state in response to demographic changes (such as increases in the population of low-income children).
- **Identify barriers to family access:** Some Priority School Districts have unfilled School Readiness seats and low-income children who arrive in kindergarten without preschool experience. The state should conduct research to identify the variety of barriers to preschool access—including cost, transportation, information, timing and cultural—and take steps towards addressing the barriers. If this is not addressed, these barriers may prevent eligible children who need preschool from accessing it.

- **Establish common quality standards for providers:** The state has made progress in recent years in aligning quality standards for different programs, particularly aligning standards for School Readiness and Child Day Care centers programs. Going forward, the state should continue working to ensure a common level of quality in all state-funded programs and across all provider types within each program. The state should also preserve its diverse delivery system that includes community-based organizations, charter schools, magnet schools and district schools, and maintain the autonomy of those programs to implement a variety of educational approaches that meet the unique needs of the families and children they serve.
- **Funding aligned to costs:** Connecticut offers some of the country’s most generous levels of funding for pre-k programs, but these programs still fall short of proven effective programs in other states, or of the estimated cost to meet Connecticut’s quality standards. Any redesign of the state’s early childhood programs should include an assessment of the true costs to meet state quality standards—including the cost to provide competitive salaries to teachers with bachelor’s degrees—and should adjust funding levels based on that assessment.
- **Blend and braid funding streams to support full-day care:** Ensuring that providers have sufficient funding to offer high-quality programs will require carefully reviewing how the state and its providers use funds from all programs—including federal Head Start funds and child care subsidy dollars—to meet the needs of families. Some states have created mechanisms to help providers “blend” and “braid” funds from Head Start, child care and state preschool sources to cover the costs of full-day, high-quality programs. Connecticut must learn from the experience of these states.

Other early childhood advocacy and stakeholder organizations in Connecticut, including Connecticut Voices for Children, have called for similar policies to create a more integrated, streamlined and equitable early childhood system in Connecticut.

**Build a high-quality, integrated and transparent ECE data system that links to the K-12 system:** Good data is the cornerstone of a high-quality early childhood system. Real-time, actionable information about the number of children being served, where they are being served and the sequence of services that individual children receive over time, is crucial to enable policymakers to understand the impact of early childhood investments, where additional services are needed and to make smart policy choices. Connecticut is working to build an integrated early childhood data system that will bring together data from two currently separate data systems, produce

unduplicated counts of children served, and link early childhood data with the K-12 system. The Early Childhood Information System (ECIS) is an online data system that collects early childhood data and information, and can be used as a tool to answer key policy questions on early childhood programs, provider workforce and young children and their families.

Additional work is needed to create a data system that provides all the information the state needs to effectively inform policy and practice. Specifically, the Office of Early Childhood must further build out the data system to ensure the following functionalities:

- Ability to produce real-time, unduplicated counts of the number of children served in early childhood programs
- Ability to track the mix of publicly-funded early childhood services (including home visiting, Care 4 Kids, state-funded preschool and special education and early intervention services) that an individual child or family receives over time
- Ability to connect child-level data to the specific providers, educators and their characteristics, such as provider type and early childhood educator credentials
- Ability to link data on children's early learning experiences to data from the state's new Kindergarten Entrance Inventory
- Ability to link data on children's early learning experiences to data on K-12 experiences and outcomes
- Ability to reconcile data on the number of children served with the number of seats funded by various funding streams and to understand the funding sources for each individual student enrolled in preschool or other early childhood programs
- Ability to track data on district-driven preschool investments, as well as state-funded initiatives. This is particularly important given recent investments in the Smart Start program, which encourages districts to create their own preschool programs

**Use the new Kindergarten Entrance Inventory to inform continuous quality improvement:** The Kindergarten Entrance Inventory creates a powerful opportunity to improve early learning outcomes in Connecticut. This inventory will be based, in part, on the Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR)—a kindergarten entrance assessment created in the late 1990s. MMSR played a critical role in helping Maryland increase the number of children entering school fully ready from 49 percent in 2001-02 to 83 percent in 2013-14. The framework, standards and assessment help early childhood educators understand the skills children need at school entrance and their progress towards them. The state also used MMSR data to inform state policy and resource allocation decisions to improve school readiness. Several steps can help Connecticut use the new Kindergarten Entrance Inventory to improve children’s school readiness:

- **Provide high-quality professional development to early childhood educators to use the Kindergarten Entrance Inventory.** Since they are typically administered by teachers in the first few weeks of kindergarten, states often focus professional development efforts on kindergarten teachers. It is equally important, however, to provide preschool and other early childhood educators professional development related to the Kindergarten Entrance Inventory. This will help early childhood educators understand the skills and knowledge that children need in kindergarten and help them track children’s progress towards those skills in early childhood settings.
- **Educate parents about the Kindergarten Entrance Inventory.** This will enable parents to understand the skills children need for kindergarten and help them to support children’s learning at home.
- **Give early childhood educators access to Kindergarten Entrance data for students they served.** The Kindergarten Entrance Inventory is not designed to be an accountability tool for providers and the state should not use this data to measure the quality of early childhood providers. Inventory data can, however, play a critical role in helping drive continuous improvement in early childhood education programs by enabling providers to see how well they prepared children for school, where children were well-prepared and where they may need additional support. The state should ensure that providers have access to Kindergarten Entrance Inventory data for their alumni and provide professional development for providers to use this data to improve their programs.

**Expand alternate pathways for early childhood educators:** Connecticut has taken steps to increase the qualifications and training of early childhood educators in state-funded programs. But the current credential requirements for early childhood educators—as well as the lack of multiple, high-quality alternative preparation options for individuals who already hold a bachelor’s degree—will make it difficult for the state to meet its goal of 100 percent certified teachers with bachelor’s degrees by 2020. Moreover, Connecticut’s current policies may be preventing potential high-quality early childhood educators from entering the profession. In New Jersey, alternative routes to certification played a crucial role in enabling the state to meet court mandates for all preschool teachers to have a bachelor’s degree and certification. Connecticut must consider a similar approach. Specifically, the state should consider the following actions:

- Expand current “resident educator certification” to include preschool teachers in both school- and community-based early childhood classrooms. This is a one-year certificate that allows the holder to work full-time as a teacher while enrolled in an alternate pathway to certification.
- Create a state-approved alternate pathway for teachers with a bachelor’s degree in any field to earn credentials while teaching under a resident educator certificate, consistent with the alternate pathway outlined in the federal Preschool Development Grant requirements. State-approved pathways could include ongoing coursework, clinical practice and/or demonstration of knowledge of content and pedagogy relating to early childhood education, as necessary to enable the target population they serve to acquire and demonstrate mastery of Connecticut competencies for early childhood educators.
- Create a competency-based pathway to certification for individuals with early childhood teaching experience and a bachelor’s degree in a non-early childhood field. This approach would allow such individuals to demonstrate their mastery of Connecticut’s Early Childhood Educator Competencies through assessments, performance tasks and/or a portfolio, rather than coursework.
- Allow teachers with a bachelor’s degree in any field and recognized certification from the Association Montessori Internationale or American Montessori Society to teach in Montessori preschool classrooms without completing additional early childhood coursework.

**Use data to inform continuous improvement:** Use of data to drive continuous improvement is a central feature of effective preschool programs, but it is not currently included in Connecticut’s required quality components for School Readiness programs. Connecticut should require all state-funded early childhood programs to collect and use data to inform continuous improvement.

At a minimum, this should include data from developmentally appropriate child assessments, as well as valid and reliable observational measures of classroom and teaching quality. To support providers in using data to improve quality and children’s learning, the state should fund targeted professional development for district early childhood specialists, elementary school principals and directors of community-based child care providers. In addition, the state should use data collected through its new integrated data system and the Kindergarten Entrance Inventory to identify areas of strength and weakness as well as inform both policy and continuous improvement efforts at a state level.

**Increase access to coaching and job-embedded professional development for teachers:** Preschool programs that have produced lasting gains for children include coaching and job-embedded professional development for teachers—elements lacking in Connecticut’s state-funded early childhood programs. To improve the quality of teaching and student learning in early childhood programs, Connecticut must expand access to high-quality coaching and job-embedded professional development for early childhood educators. There are two major ways the state could do this: one option would be to change quality requirements for School Readiness, Smart Start and other state-funded programs to require providers or School Readiness Councils to employ instructional coaches at a set coach-to-classroom ratio and to increase funding levels to enable providers or School Readiness Councils to meet this requirement. An alternative option is to contract with third-party agencies in the state to provide job-embedded coaching in targeted communities. Any third-party provider should be required to have an evidence-based coaching model that uses valid and reliable observational measures of adult-to-child interactions and classroom quality, to employ coaches with appropriate qualifications and experience and to use data to evaluate the effectiveness of its strategies. The state should also consider creating a credential to ensure the qualifications and training of individuals providing coaching.

**Building capacity for quality improvement:** The previous two recommendations will likely require an increase in capacity to support data-driven continuous improvement and coaching at the provider, local and state levels. The state should also carefully review its current investments in professional development and quality improvement to determine whether existing funds can be used more strategically, systematically and effectively to support quality improvement statewide.

### *Long-term recommendations*

**Expand access to state-funded preschool, with the eventual goal of serving all children in the state’s high-poverty communities.** Despite progress in expanding access to preschool, Connecticut’s existing programs serve less than two-thirds of low-income children. Even though these programs focus on the state’s high-poverty communities, too many children in these communities still lack access to preschool.

For example, the Office of Early Childhood’s 2014 Preschool Development grant application identified an unmet need for 1,070 preschool spaces in Bridgeport. While the grant will support creation of an additional 270 seats in Bridgeport, a gap of 800 seats remains. Given the evidence that achievement gaps start well before children enter school and research showing that low-income children receive the greatest benefit from preschool, disadvantaged children should be the priority for new preschool investments. A growing body of research suggests that community risk factors, as well as family income, impact children’s risk of struggling in school. Children living in high-poverty communities may be at risk even if their family income is above a particular threshold. Further, if preschool is one part of our long-term strategy to close achievement gaps for low-income students, it makes sense to start in communities with high-poverty schools, so that preschool and school reform efforts can work together to improve outcomes for these students. Preschool will best support school improvement when entire cohorts of kindergarteners start school with the benefit of preschool experience. Both Boston’s and New Jersey’s effective programs take this approach—offering preschool in communities with high percentages of children living in poverty. This approach may contribute to the sustained learning gains these programs produce. To replicate these benefits, Connecticut must set a goal of providing high-quality preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds in the state’s high-needs districts and increase investments until that goal is met.

**Integrate preschool into school finance reform:** Connecticut’s current approach to funding K-12 public schools is irreparably broken and must be overhauled. When the state eventually considers school finance reform, preschool funding should be a part of this conversation. First, research suggests that preschool is part of the package of services that districts serving high concentrations of disadvantaged children need to provide in order to enable them to meet college- and career-ready standards. Second, integrating preschool with the state funding formula provides a more sustainable and stable approach to funding preschool than today’s current system. This approach also avoids pitting pre-k and K-12 against one another in annual budget battles. Connecticut falls behind a number of states that already integrate pre-k into their state school funding systems.

Integrating pre-k with the state school funding formula does not necessarily mean that all children are served in school-based settings. Several states have created governance structures that fund pre-k through the school funding formula while retaining an active role for community-based providers. New Jersey’s Abbott Pre-K program makes extensive use of community-based providers even though funds flow through school districts. Similarly, Connecticut must integrate pre-k funding with school finance reform without abandoning its crucial commitment to diverse program options.

## Conclusion

Connecticut has made progress in improving the quality of and access to early childhood education in recent years and has been implementing some elements of early childhood systems infrastructure. The state, however, still has a long way to go. With the nation's largest achievement gaps for low-income and minority students, Connecticut cannot afford to ignore any potential tool for narrowing those gaps—including preschool. As Connecticut continues to move forward with key education reforms, such as increasing the number of high-performing schools, improving teacher effectiveness and reforming school funding, high-quality preschool is a crucial complement to those efforts.

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