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Testimony before the Education Committee in support of Raised Bill 5557: An Act Concerning Recruitment and Retention of Early Childhood Educators

Good Afternoon Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleishmann, and Members of the Education Committee. My name is Elizabeth Fraser; I am a policy analyst at the Connecticut Association for Human Services. CAHS works to reduce poverty and promote economic success through both policy and program work.

I am here today in support of Raised Bill 5557: An Act Concerning Recruitment and Retention of Early Childhood Educators.

The developing early childhood system is facing a problem: early care professionals have been historically underpaid. For many years, teaching preschool was considered a nice job for a stay at home mom or a retired public school teacher. However, growing awareness of the importance of those early years has caused a shift in this paradigm. We know the importance of employing qualified teaching staff, with a specialty in early learning. The increased educational requirements are important and necessary towards building a strong system of care that is accessible to all children.

However, only one side of the equation has been addressed. We have not adequately considered or addressed the need for increased compensation to pair with the increased levels of education required.

Connecticut RB 5557 requires the Office of Early Childhood to establish and implement a compensation schedule for early care teachers working in state funded programs. The schedule would be structured to be commensurate with an educator's level of education and experience in the field. Implicit is the need for the Office of Early Childhood to budget and provide additional funding to allow for the increase in salary. Passage of this bill is an important and necessary step to ensure the continued availability of early care teachers and the ability of centers to provide care for our children.

Qualified, well trained teachers are crucial for the delivery of quality early care and education.¹ Research shows that employing highly educated early care teachers has an immediate effect on learning. Better qualified teachers make early care and education much more effective. Quality early care programs provide the stable and developmentally appropriate learning environment that greatly contributes to the development of the child. Having an eager and well prepared workforce is crucial to provide these services.

In order to provide quality early care and education, the State of Connecticut established minimum required credentials for teachers and educators in publicly funded centers.² The original legislation established that by 2015, half of the early care teachers should have at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or its equivalent, the other half needed to have an associate's degree. However, centers had difficulty in meeting this deadline. There were several reasons for this problem; the small number of colleges with OEC approved early childhood bachelor programs, and the low wages that are paid to for degreed early childhood teachers in community settings. Because of the difficulty centers were having in meeting this deadline, the statute was amended to allow centers until 2017 to be in compliance with this requirement. However, by 2020, all early care teachers will still need to meet bachelor degree requirement.

This piece of legislation was a needed interim remedy, acknowledging the hiring difficulties centers are facing, and providing short term relief, but not a long term solution. Unless we address the root cause of the problem, we will be in the same situation in 2020. According to the recently released Office of Early Childhood workforce plan, the average readiness teacher in a public school earns an average annual salary of \$53,045 for the school year.³ The average wage for a teacher in a community provider readiness program is \$33,939, a difference of almost \$20,000 dollars. Each year the public schools increase wages by experience and salary bumps. Operating on close to flat funding, the early care community can not afford such increases.

The cost of a college education makes it prohibitive to work in a field without earning potential. With current wages, certified teachers and recent graduates are much more likely to pursue careers in public school systems than in subsidized, early care centers. Directors are finding that as their staff members attain degrees, they often leave their center for public schools, where they can earn a wage reflective of their education and experience. In order to sustain an effective, well qualified workforce

¹ <http://preschoolmatters.org/2013/06/03/highly-qualified-teachers-the-workforce-early-educations-needs-and-deserves/>

² Public Statute (10-16 p)

³ Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, *A Plan to Assist Early Education State Funded Providers to Degree Attainment and Increased Compensation*, 2016

for the Connecticut early care and education system, the state needs to increase funding to a level that can allow providers to attract well-qualified workers.

Raised bill 5557 will set a plan in motion to fund subsidized childcare centers at a rate that allows teachers to be compensated at a wage that reflective of their education and expertise and narrows the public school wage gap. The proposed compensation schedule will ensure that there is consistent and fair compensation for early childhood educators. We realize this might mean a choice between numbers of children served or higher wages. It is a difficult choice, but unless we address the issue of compensation, there will not be enough teachers that meet the educational requirement and are available to teach.

We realize that the state budget difficulties will make this difficult to fully implement. However, it is possible to begin the process of researching and developing a compensation scale, and planning for future implementation. This needs to be on the forefront of early childhood planning. If we are to continue our high standards in early care and education and provide quality experiences for our children, then we will need to more intentionally consider the dilemma of provider wages.