

Testimony before the State of Connecticut Appropriations Committee

February 24, 2014

Good Evening Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and Members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Elizabeth Fraser; for the past 12 years I have been working as Program Director and Early Childhood Coordinator for Middletown Even Start, a two-generation learning program. As of today, I am transitioning into a new position as a Policy Analyst for the Connecticut Association for Human Services.

My colleague, Tamara Kramer from CAHS, has submitted testimony on CAHS positions concerning the Governor's Early Education Initiatives and the importance of the OEC becoming part of CT statute.

So for tonight, I am testifying as an exiting Even Start Director. I am speaking on behalf of every family that I have had the privilege of working with, as well as many families that I will never meet. Each of these families includes an infant or toddler whose primary caregiver has not yet completed high school. As can be expected, they are some of Connecticut's most vulnerable families.

On behalf of these families I am requesting that:

- Funding for two -generation learning programs be expanded to include more CT communities
- The Governor's "CHET Baby Scholars" Initiative be included in the Appropriations Committee Budget.
- The Office of Early Childhood is voted into law, permanently establishing a cohesive system to advance the important work of early childhood and families.

**Funding for Two Generational Learning Programs be expanded**

The prevalence of parents lacking high school and post-secondary education in Connecticut is striking. The United States Census , American Fact Finder estimates that from 2010-2012 approximately 5,000 babies were born in Connecticut each year to a mother who had not yet completed high school. An additional 8,500 babies were born to a mother who did not have any pos -secondary education. Many of these parents are single, struggling financially and, due to lack of education and lack of infant/toddler care, have limited opportunities. Although some supports for families are available, they are scattered throughout agencies and are difficult to navigate. Very few of the available supports include access to the quality infant/ toddler care which would allow for a parent to complete his or her educational goals and for the child to flourish. It is no wonder that the cycle of generational poverty continues unchecked.

Two Generation learning models, such as Connecticut Even Start, address the challenges faced by these families. Grant guidelines specify that programs must address and be accountable for parent outcomes, child outcomes and family/parenting outcomes. The three programs remaining from the original federal grant provide education for both parent and child **and** provide a portal to the supports and community programs needed for family stabilization. A parenting education component ensures that parents have access to information and tools needed to become a partner in their child's education.

Unlike many programs, two generation programs have both short term and long term impact. In the short term, we are educating parents toward their educational goals and meaningful employment. Children are receiving a strong start in quality programs and those with suspected developmental delays

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are identified early. In the long term, families are more stable, children are transitioned into quality early education programs and most important, parents take an active role in their child's educational progress. As we know, a parent's involvement in their child's education is directly correlated to the success of the child.

Nationally, the role and importance of two generation programs is getting much attention. Ascend of the Aspen Institute; the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation are all recognizing the benefits of integrating "two-generational" programs into the system of supports available for vulnerable families. At the 2013 Aspen Institute *Forum on Innovations in Early Childhood*, Carla Thomson of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation stated, "The lens is families and children. We're thinking two-gen because children don't live outside the context of their families"

The Even Start Coalition, with input and guidance from the Office of Early Childhood, has been working on a strategic planning model that would push two generation programs forward and secure a more intentional place in Connecticut's future early childhood system. The process was facilitated by Judy Goldfarb, formally of the Hartford Area Child Care Collaborative. A report on the work completed to date is available by request from the Office of Early Childhood.

The Even Start Coalition applauds the Governor and this Committee for including the Even Start Two-Generation Family Learning Program in the 2013-2015 Biennial Budget. By doing so, Connecticut is on the forefront of a national movement towards two- gen learning. Now is the time to grow the program and provide access to many more families.

**Include the CHET Baby Scholars Program in the Appropriations Budget.**

The "Baby Chet" program is a smart way to ensure that every child begins their life with the possibility, *the thought*, that he or she will be receiving post-secondary education. This program is, in effect, a declaration from the State of Connecticut that that each child deserves and needs post-secondary education.

A recently published CFED report entitled, *Investing in Hope, a Two Generational Approach to Asset Building*, reports that, "Children from low or moderate income households with savings between \$1.00 and \$499.00 are 3 times more likely to attend college and 4 times more likely to graduate from college." That is a great return on investment. In addition much of this investment will be coming back to the Connecticut in the form of tuition.

Although the state monetary contribution for each child is small, the idea is large. Many of the parents that I work with desperately want their children to attend college but don't have a plan for how this might happen. Most have a difficult time seeing beyond their food bill or heating bill or rent. The CHET Baby Scholars Program provides the vehicle for parents to contribute to the future education of their child. But, of more importance, it concretely establishes the *idea* that a parent *should* contribute and should start early.

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Over 18 years, the initial CT contribution of \$250.00, combined with a parental contribution of just \$10.00 a month, will grow these accounts to several thousand dollars. While this is certainly not enough to pay for a degree, it is more than enough to demonstrate commitment to each child's future

**Permanently Establish the Office of Early Childhood**

One of the most promising achievements from the 2013 Legislative Session was the work done to establish the Office of Early Childhood. The tangled web of infrastructure and disparate services once in place is being restructured to provide an integrated and accountable system.

But the work is not done. Now is the time to vote the Office of Early Childhood into Connecticut Statute, and quickly, so that the positive changes that are being made are permanently established as part of Connecticut's educational system.

A recent ASCEND Report, *Gateways to Two Generations*, stresses that "an adaptive infrastructure and cohesive systems may be two of the most important factors to ensuring successful implementation, and strong outcomes for both parents and children." Common Sense tells us the same thing.

This is what we all want, "strong outcomes for parents and children." With the OEC firmly in place we can be assured that we are moving in a direction that provides the cohesive environment necessary to ensure this can happen.