

Connecticut Commission on
Women, Children *and* Seniors



**Testimony before the Committee on Education of the General Assembly
Submitted by Steven Hernández, Executive Director
Commission on Women, Children and Seniors
March 6, 2017**

**Re: SB 786, An Act Concerning Education Mandate Relief, Transparency and Regional Incentives
SB 952 (Raised), An Act Concerning the Sharing of Federal Funding Between the Office of Early Childhood and the Department of Social Services
SB 953 (Raised), An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Task Force on Professional Development and In-Service Training Requirements for Educators
SB 954 (Raised), An Act Concerning the Development of a Plan for Universal Preschool
HB 7205 (Raised), An Act Concerning Early Literacy**

Senator Boucher, and Senator Slossberg, and Representative Fleischmann, and distinguished members of the Committee on Education: Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the Commission on Women, Children and Seniors (CWCS) on the above referenced bills.

SB (Governor's Bill) 786, An Act Concerning Education Mandate Relief, Transparency and Regional Incentives

CWCS is mindful of the need for maximizing the value of the state's educational investments, and recognizes that regionalizing the services supporting our school systems has resulted in some cost savings. However, in its review of the proposed language in Sections 6, 7, and 8 of Governor's Bill 786, the Commission does have one word of advice: The Superintendent of a school system has the background, training, and certification to oversee all aspects of governance of that school system, and to promote the best educational outcomes for children within that system—as it reflects a particular population, its needs, and its related services. The Superintendent also is charged with developing a vision which is unique to the location and population served, and which meets the unique requirements of the local board of education by whom that Superintendent is employed. Due to the complexities of that situation—in terms of educational quality, local needs, and political realities—the regionalization of the Superintendent function may have unintended consequences beyond mere cost savings. Without thoughtful planning to address potential complications, this change of functions may result in greater costs rather than less, or might result in less desirable educational outcomes.

To regionalize the oversight of an entire school system is a far more difficult matter than to create a cost-sharing plan for custodial services, or energy purchases, or any other expenses for services incurred by school systems which have negligible relationship to the administration of effective and

appropriate instruction. The Commission respectfully suggests the reconsideration of this proposed innovation to allow for further study prior to attempting implementation.

SB 952 (Raised), An Act Concerning the Sharing of Federal Funding Between the Office of Early Childhood and the Department of Social Services

With regard to SB 952, CWCS takes note of the special developmental needs of early childhood, which are different from the developmental needs of older children and call for a completely different set of expertise and awareness, both in the classroom and in administrative oversight, at all levels. It was recognition of the specificity of those needs, at least in part, that resulted in the formation of the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) and in its eventual establishment as a free-standing executive agency.

While we recognize there are no easy answers as to how to address the budgetary needs of OEC, CWCS suggests the following considerations:

- In two short years, OEC has been set a monumental task of aligning a number of funding streams and programs, each of which has its own history and limitations – some imposed by state legislation. OEC has been set that task at the same time that it has been beset by shrinking budgets and increasing demands at the federal level. Before the legislature undertakes to fix a problem that many great minds have yet to even define, we ought to be careful not to confound the signs of a burgeoning agency with signs of a failing one.
- OEC has had to be particularly nimble in its response to rapidly changing federal initiatives. This context is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. If the funding for early childhood programs returns in whole or in part to the Department of Social Services, in which very young children are but a small part of the population receiving services, their specific educational and developmental needs may not retain the high priority they have at OEC.
- Lastly, at OEC, whose sole charge is our youngest citizens, the agency has the expertise and awareness to make the most informed decisions about the allocation of the precious resources available for early childhood education, and to track the outcomes of those expenditures with greater acumen. The evaluation of these outcomes is highly technical, and cannot be left to chance. The state's investments in the early brain development of our youngest citizens are of paramount importance to the future of our state and the health of its economy. We should exercise the greatest care, with the most finely focused expertise, on maximizing the outcome of those investments.

SB 953 (Raised), An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Task Force on Professional Development and In-Service Training Requirements for Educators

With regard to SB 953, the Commission is concerned at the proposed elimination from statute of “the detection and recognition of, and evidence-based structured literacy interventions for, students with dyslexia...”

Our teachers need help in diagnosing dyslexia early. If teachers are not adequately prepared to diagnostically assess and prescriptively teach fundamental reading skills to children who experience a core deficit that results in dyslexia, then those students will suffer delays in educational progress

from which they may never recover—and be lost to our educational system and our future workforce.

According to KidsHealth, “about 15% to 20% of the U.S. population has the specific reading disability called dyslexia, which is the major cause of reading failure in school. Dealing with this learning challenge can lead to frustration and self-doubt, especially when it goes undiagnosed for a long time. The good news is that dyslexia can be identified early and kids who have it can be taught to become successful readers.”

Dyslexia’s core deficit is in the area of phonological processing. In layperson’s language, those individuals beset with this deficit have difficulty hearing and understanding the sounds that make up words. According to Dr. Margie Gillis of Literacy How, “Although most K-3 educators know the term phonemic awareness and some can even define it, they don’t understand it well enough to teach it explicitly, effectively, and to mastery.” If as many as 20% of Connecticut school children may experience dyslexia, then our teachers must be **required** to be adequately prepared to recognize the signs of dyslexia, diagnostically assess the extent of its effects, and prescriptively teach children the fundamental skills they must have to overcome it, lest they never recover and become the good readers we want every child to be.

The Commission respectfully urges that the provision regarding dyslexia be restored to Senate Bill No. 953, and that the provision in statute relating to dyslexia remain as originally enacted.

SB 954 (Raised), An Act Concerning the Development of a Plan for Universal Preschool

The Commission strongly supports the passage of Senate Bill No. 954, and the proposed plan to implement universal pre-school in the State of Connecticut.

According to the NCSL, “Without a high-quality preschool education, some students will enter kindergarten behind their peers. Currently, African-American and Hispanic children are, on average, 9 to 10 months behind their white classmates in math skills and 7 to 12 months behind in reading, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research. These differences can persist throughout their K-12 careers.”¹

The effectiveness of universal pre-school for 3 and 4 year olds in addressing that early gap in learning readiness has been amply demonstrated in studies both in this state and in others. In Connecticut, a recently completed study for this Committee by the Neag School of Education at UConn, working with the Connecticut Academy of Science and Engineering, concluded that students who participated in pre-school at age 4 entered kindergarten ahead of their same-aged peers in both literacy and numeracy skills.²

We should be confident that universal early childhood instruction, developed by the Department of Education and the Office of Early Childhood, paired with robust instruction in Grades K-3, will be

¹ “3 Things Lawmakers Can Do Now for Our Youngest Learners”, State Legislatures Magazine, December 2016, <http://www.ncsl.org/bookstore/state-legislatures-magazine/3-things-lawmakers-can-do-now-for-our-youngest-learners.aspx>

² “Early Childhood Regression Discontinuity Study,” A Report by the Connecticut Academy of Science and Engineering, June 2016, www.ctcase.org/reports/EarlyChildhood/earlychildhood.pdf

a crucial strategy in narrowing the achievement gap in Connecticut. This investment in the preparation of our children for the future—and the preparation of our future workforce—should be embraced with enthusiasm, and deserves the Committee’s support.

HB 7205 (Raised), An Act Concerning Early Literacy

CWCS enthusiastically supports the passage of Raised Bill No. 7205.

The modifications to existing statute in Section 1 strengthen the goal of the legislation to facilitate professional development of all certified teachers engaged in reading instruction. At the same time, this additional provision has been narrowly carved so that the privacy protections afforded professional staff under Section 145*r* remain in effect.

Section 2 of the bill, presenting new language regarding reading readiness, provides a strong framework for engaging districts in the implementation of successful literacy programming with full support of the State Department of Education. The Connecticut K-3 Literacy Initiative, the model for this legislation, has been successfully piloted in Alliance districts and individual schools, with strong and consistent demonstrations of efficacy in quickly increasing early reading skills.

Results from the CK3LI pilots consistently show that students experience greater growth in early literacy skills when their school implements this new model. The goal of the legislation is to build on the learning from the CK3LI pilots to expand state capacity to provide tiered support to schools and districts implementing the model, to narrow the reading achievement gap among Connecticut’s students.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment today on these bills.