



Universal Access to Preschool in Connecticut: When All is Said and Done, There's Been Much More Said than Done

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I. What's Been Said?

Across Connecticut, a gap in academic achievement persists between economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers. The problem of the achievement gap is not new and the solution is no mystery. As Governor Rell correctly stated in her 2005 State of the State Address, “the correlation between the achievement gap and the preparation gap is profound.”¹ Poor children arrive at kindergarten already behind in important cognitive and verbal skills, and never catch up. Policymakers know the formula for closing the preparation gap includes, as an essential ingredient, high quality preschool for all of Connecticut’s children, especially those from at-risk environments. Connecticut has acknowledged this for nearly a decade:

- In 1997, Connecticut boldly began the School Readiness Initiative (PA 97-259).
- In 2002, the Connecticut State Board of Education announced the following *Position Statement on Preschool Programs and Services*: “The Connecticut State Board of Education is committed to ensuring that all of the state’s preschool-age children, including children with disabilities, are afforded an opportunity to participate in a high-quality preschool education.”²
- In 2003, the Connecticut State Board of Education defined the following vision: “By the end of the decade (2010), all children in the state of Connecticut will have high-quality preschool services available to them, beginning at age 3.”³
- In 2005, Governor Rell stated in her Budget Address, “It is at the core of our efforts to address the achievement gap.”⁴
- Now, in 2006, a primary goal of the CT Early Childhood Education Cabinet⁵ is that all children “begin kindergarten with the knowledge, skills and behaviors needed for success in school.”⁶

¹ Governor M. Jodi Rell. *2005 Budget Address*, available at <http://www.ct.gov/governorrell/cwp/view.asp?Q=289784&A=1761>

² Available at <http://www.state.ct.us/sde/deps/Early/index.htm>

³ *Closing the Achievement Gaps: Removing the Barriers to Preschool in Connecticut* (CT State Board of Education, 2003), available at <http://www.state.ct.us/sde/deps/Early/PreschoolReport.pdf>

⁴ Governor M. Jodi Rell. *2005 Budget Address*, available at <http://www.ct.gov/governorrell/cwp/view.asp?Q=289784&A=1761>

⁵ *Ready by 5 & Fine by 9* (CT Early Childhood Cabinet, 2006), available at http://ecforums.communityresultscenter.org/docs/Published_Framework.pdf

⁶ Full report available at <http://ecforums.communityresultscenter.org/index.php>

Despite a decade of discussion about this crisis, little progress has been made. There is an obvious gap between Connecticut’s vision for children and knowing what works and the State’s willingness to make the necessary investments to move from vision to action. Past efforts have been too often short lived and under-funded, and increases in one early care program are commonly coupled with cuts to others. Specifically:

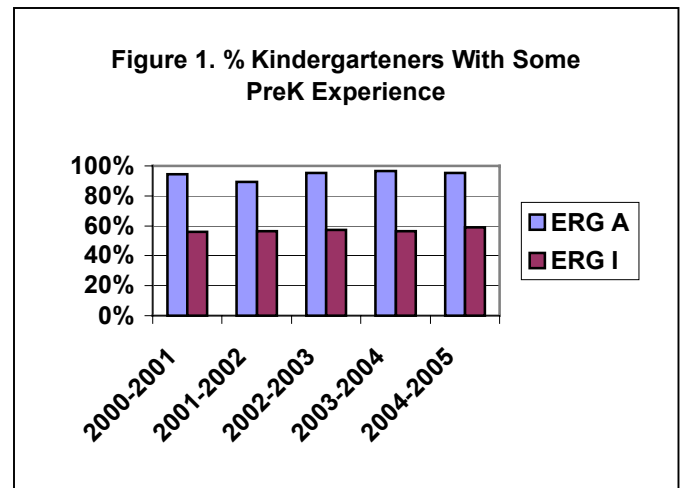
- **Efforts are short lived and under-funded.** At the rate of growth the School Readiness Program has experienced since 2000 (less than 300 spaces per year), *it will take 30 years to serve the additional 8,700 eligible children that SDE estimates are still waiting for a preschool spot, and 60 years to meet the needs of all 18,000 children across the state in need of preschool.*
- **Increases in some early care programs for some children have been coupled with even deeper cuts in other early care programs.** School Readiness subsidized 1,541 more preschool spaces in 2005 than in 2002, but Head Start, State Funded Centers and Care4Kids programs subsidized 2,906 fewer preschool spaces during the same time frame. *So, over the period 2002 to 2005, Connecticut’s early care programs all together lost 1,365 subsidized spaces.*

This report summarizes Connecticut’s efforts over the last decade to address the preparation gap, and ultimately the achievement gap, by increasing access to high quality preschool.

II. Inequality Starts Early

Policymakers now are looking to early childhood for opportunities to close the achievement gap. They understand that policies that attempt to “fix” the gap are more costly to the state and to children than are wise investments made to “prevent” the gap. High quality early care and education is smart prevention.

Indeed, the first five years of life are particularly critical to developing basic learning patterns and abilities that determine a child’s readiness to succeed in kindergarten, elementary school, and beyond. Studies continue to find that *two* years of preschool beginning at age 3 significantly increase children’s vocabulary compared to children who did not attend, but the effect of one year at age 4 is not statistically significant.⁷ Sadly, the playing field is not level for all children. As shown in Figure 1, children in towns with the fewest risk factors (ERG A⁸) are 1.5 times more likely than children in Connecticut’s most at risk towns (ERG I) to attend preschool. The Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE) estimates that in 2004 there were nearly 18,000 3- and 4-year-olds across the state not enrolled in preschool;⁹ and the department offers no



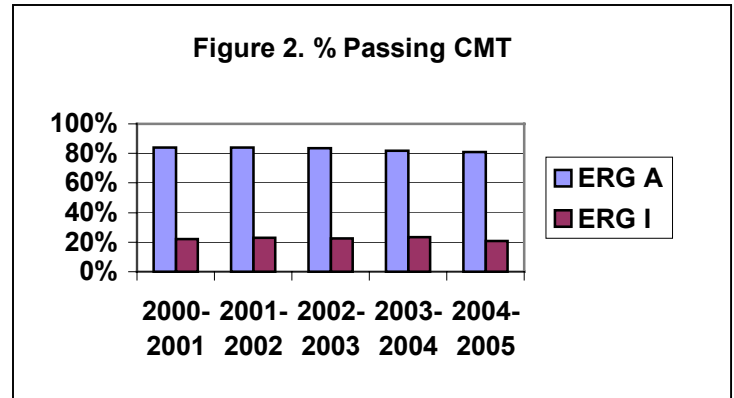
⁷ W.S. Barnett & C. Esposito Lamy, *Estimated Impacts of Number of Years of Preschool Attendance on Vocabulary, Literacy and Math Skills at Kindergarten Entry*, (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2006), available at: <http://nieer.org/docs/?DocID=141>

⁸ The following characteristics are used by the State Department of Education to group towns and cities: the size of the school system; median family income; percent of college-educated parents; percent of parents in managerial or professional occupations; percent of single-parent families; percent of non-English speaking families; percent of households receiving welfare benefits. In 2006 The CT State Department of Education switched from Economic Reference Groups to District Reference Groups. A table comparing each ERG to its new DRG is available at http://www.ctkidslink.org/pub_detail_303.html.

⁹ *Educational Learning Initiatives for Excellence*, (Connecticut State Board of Education, 2004), available at www.state.ct.us/sde/ed_life.pdf#search=%22%22educational%20learning%20initiatives%22%20sde%20connecticut%22

guarantee that those children who *were* in preschool were receiving a high quality educational experience that would predict future success.

It is also clear that the poor children who start school already behind never catch up. Gaps in access to high quality preschool translate into even greater gaps in later academic achievement. As shown in Figure 2, students in ERG A are four times more likely to pass the Connecticut Mastery Test in reading than students in ERG I. From the 2000-2001 school year, to the 2004-2005¹⁰ school year, there were no improvements in closing this gap.



III. What’s Been Done?

The understanding that young brains are learning long before kindergarten, and the best way to close the achievement gap is to prevent the gap from ever developing is not new. In 1997 Connecticut was a pioneer in starting to address the early learning needs of at risk preschoolers through the School Readiness Initiative (PA 97-259). In 1999, *Children’s Advocate* news magazine published an article titled *Quality Early Care and Education for All Children? Some States Have Taken Big Steps Toward That Goal.*¹¹ The article acknowledged Connecticut as one of the few states to adopt programs leading to universal access to preschool.

Data suggest that Connecticut’s early investments to date have paid off. In a 2004 evaluation, conducted by Dr. Kristine Milka for the Connecticut Commission on Children, the School Readiness program was found to:¹²

- *Improve language and literacy skills.* Children with two years of preschool were twice as likely to be seen by their teachers as ready for kindergarten in language and literacy skills than their peers without preschool.
- *Improve math skills.* Children with two years of preschool were twice as likely to be seen by their teachers as ready for kindergarten in math skills than their peers without preschool.
- *Improve social/emotional skills.* Children with two years of preschool were one and a half times as likely to be seen by their teachers as ready for kindergarten in social/emotional skills than their peers without preschool.
- *Improve motor skills.* Children with two years of preschool were one and a half times as likely to be seen by their teachers as ready for kindergarten in fine motor skills than their peers without preschool.

Although evaluations of the initiative prove time and again¹³ that this has been a wise investment, the program has seen little growth since a strong start in its earliest years.

In 1998 the program served 2,648 preschool children in the eligible Priority School Districts (PSD’s). By 2000, the program served 6,424 children; a 140% increase. However, since then, momentum has slowed despite the continued expression of a commitment to expansion. In 2003, the Connecticut State Board of Education, in a joint

¹⁰ 2004-2005 is the most recent Strategic School Profile Data available at this time, available at, <http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/der/ssp/dist0405/district.htm>. In 2006 The CT State Department of Education switched from Economic Reference Groups to District Reference Groups. A table comparing each ERG to its new DRG is available at http://www.ctkidslink.org/pub_detail_303.html.

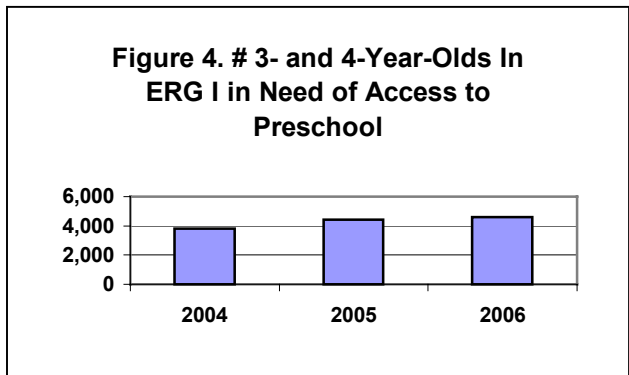
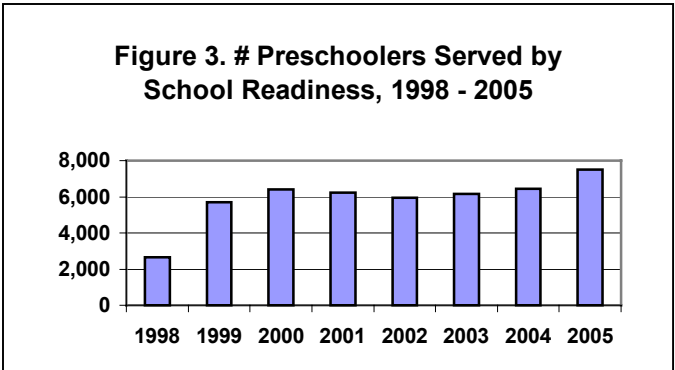
¹¹ Available at www.4children.org/news/1199qual.htm

¹² *Opening the Kindergarten Door* (Connecticut Commission on Children, 2004), available at, www.cga.ct.gov/coc/PDFs/book.pdf

¹³ Districts, including Stamford and Bridgeport, have conducted separate evaluations of School Readiness that support these findings.

document and forum titled *Closing the Achievement Gap: Removing the Barriers to Preschool in Connecticut*, defined the vision that “By the end of the decade (i.e., 2010), all children in the state of Connecticut will have high-quality preschool services available to them, beginning at age 3.”¹⁴

But the actions necessary to actualize this vision have not followed. As shown in Figure 3, as of 2005, 7,494 children (44% of those eligible) were being served,¹⁵ an increase of just 1,070 children since 2000. In the FY 07 budget, the legislature approved funding for an additional 1,000 spaces. SDE estimates that another 8,731 children in the Priority School Districts still are in need of a School Readiness space.¹⁶ Thousands more are living in families in these eligible districts, but struggling to pay for the high cost of preschool care without the help of the state.



While the FY 07 expansion is a significant improvement from the more modest investments made in the immediately prior years, the recent expansion still falls far short of ensuring equal access to high quality preschool for all children in Connecticut by 2010. Indeed, it appears that growth in the number of children eligible for and in need of School Readiness services exceeds growth in the program in Connecticut’s most at-risk towns. As shown in Figure 4, in 2004, SDE estimated that there were 3,810 3- and 4- year old children in ERG I in need of a preschool space and unable to be served. By January 2005 this estimate had increased to 4,415 preschoolers.¹⁷ In March

2006, SDE estimated that 4,578 children in ERG I were in need of a preschool space and unable to be served.¹⁸ This is an increase in unserved children of 20% in just two years.

In short, following a smart idea and a strong start, the seeming complexities and obvious expense of growing School Readiness have Connecticut policymakers paralyzed. *At the rate of growth the program has experienced since 2000 (less than 300 spaces per year), it will take 30 years to serve the additional 8,700 eligible children that SDE estimates are still waiting for a preschool spot, and 60 years to meet the needs of all 18,000¹⁹ children across Connecticut estimated to be in need of preschool.* This timeline lands us far short of the State Board of Education’s vision that “by the end of the decade (i.e., 2010) all children in the state of Connecticut will have high-quality preschool services available to them.”

¹⁴ *Closing the Achievement Gaps: Removing the Barriers to Preschool in Connecticut* (CT State Board of Education, 2003), available at <http://www.state.ct.us/sde/deps/Early/PreschoolReport.pdf>

¹⁵ Since 2001, 98% or more of all School Readiness spaces have been consistently filled, indicating a continued need.

¹⁶ To arrive at this number, SDE estimates that about 90% of all preschool children not yet attending preschool in these 19 towns would do so, if a program were available. *A Report to the General Assembly: School Readiness Need and Costs to Serve All 3- and 4-year-Old Children in the 19 Priority School Districts*, (Connecticut State Board of Education, 2006), available at www.state.ct.us/sde/deps/readiness/SR_Report.pdf

¹⁷ *Educational Learning Initiatives for Excellence, (Connecticut State Board of Education, 2004)*, available at http://www.state.ct.us/sde/ed_life.pdf#search=%22%22educational%20learning%20initiatives%22%20sde%20connecticut%22

¹⁸ *A Report to the General Assembly: School Readiness Need and Costs to Serve All 3- and 4-year-Old Children in the 19 Priority School Districts*, (Connecticut State Board of Education, 2006), available at www.state.ct.us/sde/deps/readiness/SR_Report.pdf

¹⁹ *Educational Learning Initiatives for Excellence, (Connecticut State Board of Education, 2004)*, available at http://www.state.ct.us/sde/ed_life.pdf#search=%22%22educational%20learning%20initiatives%22%20sde%20connecticut%22

IV. Does Connecticut Have the Will to Move from Talk to Action?

The 2006 Early Childhood Education Cabinet's proposed investment framework, *Ready by 5 & Fine by 9*, aptly identifies as a top priority the need for fiscal support to finish the job of providing access to quality preschool to all 3- and 4-year olds in the Priority School Districts (PSD's) who wish access. It also identifies the need for expansion to needy families living outside the PSD's, and appropriately respects the importance of also expanding state-funded preschool services through the current mixed model of service delivery (School Readiness, Head Start and State Funded Centers) with particular emphasis on addressing state reimbursement inequities for state-funded center-based preschool programs.

Yet, despite stating that a goal of the *Ready by 5 & Fine by 9* framework is "to help ensure that all of the state's young children, regardless of where they live" are prepared for school, the framework falls short of committing to an action plan that will realize this vision. Instead, it employs the strategy of "Targeting for Maximum Return." In short, the framework triages among families in need, focusing only on the percentage it is willing to support. In the end, it ignores more than 14,000 preschoolers in need.

There are approximately 92,500 3- and 4-year-olds in Connecticut. Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of the need for preschool spaces for these children and the proportion of all preschoolers currently being served by various funding sources (i.e., state subsidies, parent fees). The State Department of Education (SDE) assumes that 10% (9,250 children) would not choose to attend preschool outside the home, even if they had access to it. SDE estimates that approximately 18,000 3- and 4-year-olds (20%) still do not have access to preschool and would choose it.²⁰ Based on this assumption it can be estimated that approximately 65,000 3- and 4-year olds across Connecticut are accessing preschool services paid for either by parent fees, or with the assistance of a state program such as State Funded Centers, Head Start, School Readiness, or Care4Kids, the child care subsidy program, or a combination of parent fees and program subsidies. It is estimated that approximately 22,000 preschool spaces are subsidized in some way by one or more of these state programs.²¹ Therefore, as illustrated in Figure 5, at least 43,000 children (and most likely many more) are in spaces paid for entirely through parent fees.

Of these 43,000 children it can be estimated that one quarter of them²² (10,750) are in families with annual incomes below self sufficiency and, as such are struggling to pay the high expense of preschool education. The *Ready by 5 & Fine by 9* framework does not acknowledge the very real needs of these 10,750 children in low income families, outside the Priority School Districts, who are "not poor enough" for state aid, but are struggling to make ends meet, pay for preschool on their own, stay off of welfare, and keep their children out of the child welfare system all the while.

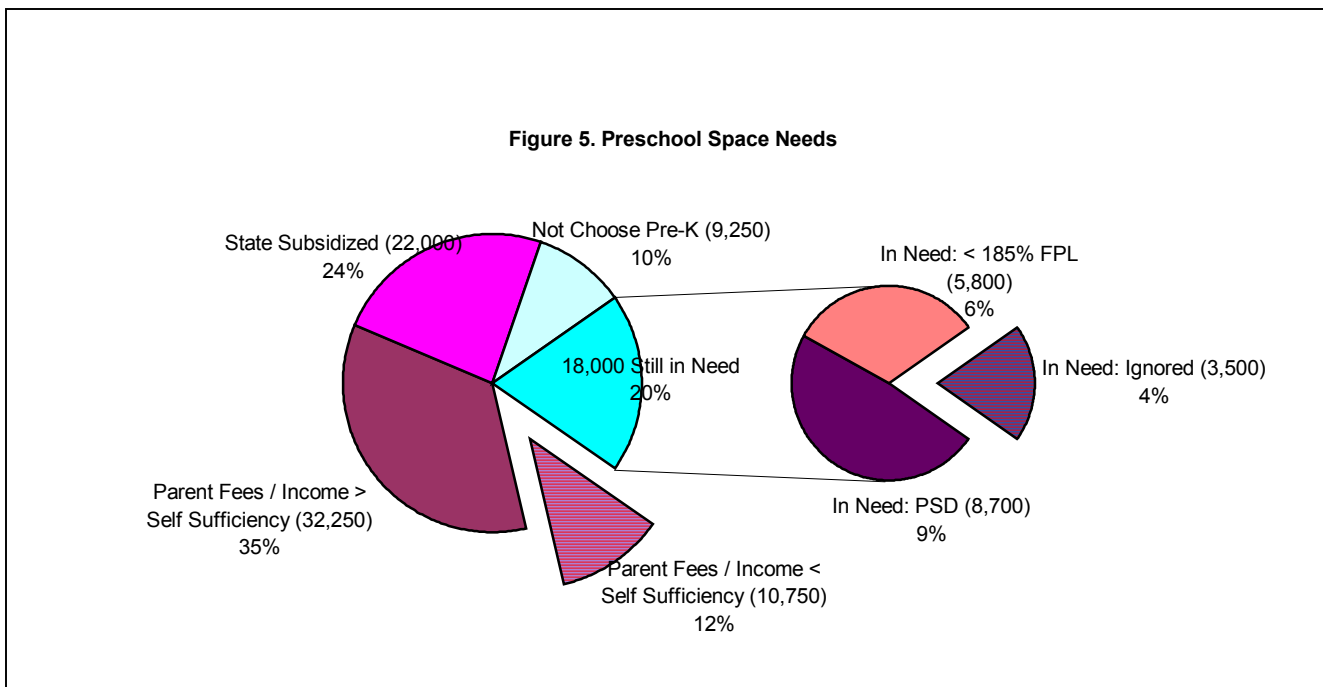
²⁰ *Educational Learning Initiatives for Excellence*, (Connecticut State Board of Education, 2004), available at www.state.ct.us/sde/ed_life.pdf#search=%22%22educational%20learning%20initiatives%22%20sde%20connecticut%22

²¹ See Figure 6

²² This may be a slight overestimation as many of the state's poorer children may clearly be in state subsidized care. This is an estimate based on the finding that one in four Connecticut children (25%) live in families with incomes below 200% FPL, roughly equivalent to Connecticut's self sufficiency standard. Hall, D & Geballe, S. *The State of Working Connecticut, 2006*, (Connecticut Voices for Children, 2006), available at http://www.ctkidslink.org/pub_detail_308.html

The *Ready by 5 & Fine by 9* framework divides the 18,000 children SDE defines as “in need” of preschool into three populations (as shown in the small pie chart in Figure 5) and proposes to provide assistance to approximately 14,500 of those preschoolers in two of the three populations, ignoring another 3,500. Specifically, as shown in Figure 5:

1. The framework proposes to provide a preschool space to all 3- and 4-year-olds in the 19 PSD’s identified as in need of a preschool space; approximately 8,700 children.
2. The framework proposes to provide a preschool space to those 3- and 4-year-olds outside the PSD’s in but only if living in families with an annual income at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level (\$24,420 for a single parent with one child of any age in 2005); approximately 5,800 children.
3. The framework *does not* address the needs of the other 3- and 4-year-olds outside the PSD’s in families with an annual income above 185% of the Federal Poverty Level regardless of their need for financial assistance in accessing preschool services; approximately 3,500 children.



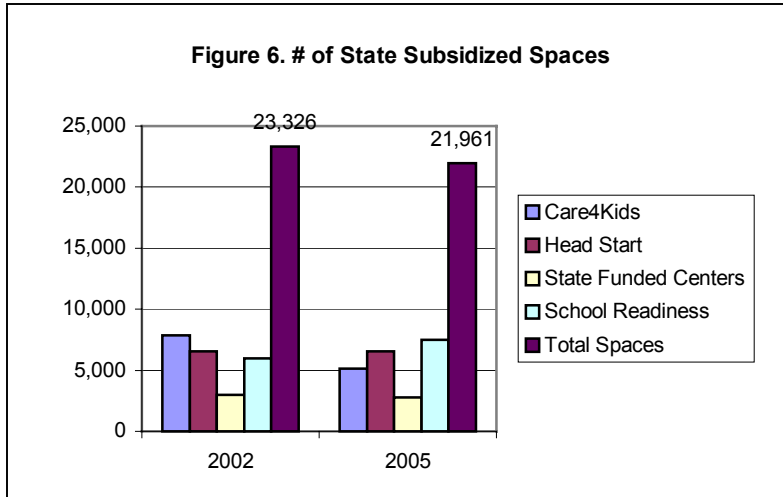
All together, as designated by the two striped pie pieces in Figure 5, the *Ready by 5 & Fine by 9* framework fails to address the needs of approximately 14,250 preschool children at risk based on their family income or place of residence. And this is the best-case scenario; many more families will struggle if the plan is not fully funded.

The Framework supports its decision to limit services to families at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level “based on a robust collection of scientific studies showing that living in poverty is a strong predictor of school un-readiness and later academic challenge.” This income threshold is set too low. In Connecticut a single parent raising one preschooler needs between \$33,000 and \$52,000 in income each year (depending on the region) to meet basic household expenses.²³ However, according to the proposed framework, a single mother with one preschooler and an annual salary of \$25,000 would not be eligible.

²³ D. Pearce, *The Real Cost of Living in 2005: The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Connecticut*, (Office of Workforce Competitiveness, State of Connecticut, 2005), available at http://www.cga.ct.gov/PCSW/Publications/Self_SufficiencyCT05%20Full%20Report_12_13_05.pdf

V. One Step Forward, Two Steps Back Doesn't Advance Connecticut Toward Its Goal

As illustrated in Figure 6, between 2002 and 2005 any gains made by School Readiness were met with greater losses in complementary early care programs, for an end sum loss. Historically, low income parents unable to access School Readiness have relied on other programs to help pay for preschool: Head Start, Department of Social Services (DSS) State Funded Child Development Centers, or Care4Kids, Connecticut's child care subsidy. Now,



these families are met with the reality of funding cuts and a deterioration of these services that have served as the backbone of early care funding. From 2002 to 2005, total funding to Head Start, State Funded Centers and Care4Kids decreased by 32% (from \$197 million in 2002 to \$134.2 million in 2005).²⁴ Together, Head Start, State Funded Centers and Care4Kids programs subsidized 2,906 fewer preschool spaces in 2005 than in 2002. In contrast, School Readiness subsidized 1,541 more preschool spaces in 2005 than in 2002. *So, over the period 2002 to 2005, Connecticut's early care programs together lost 1,365 subsidized spaces.*

VI. Recommendations to Move from Talk to Action

1. Finish the job started by the School Readiness Initiative. Continue to implement the commitment to Priority School District towns to adequately fund high quality preschool spaces for all 3 and 4 year olds. Provide funding equal to the true cost of providing quality care as defined by the CT Early Care and Education Finance Project.²⁵ Increase flexibility in preschool program implementation related to where services can be provided, including the ability to cross town boundaries.
2. Expand School Readiness. Expand state-funded preschool to *all* families in need of assistance residing outside the Priority School Districts.
3. Build on existing programs. The misconceived assumption that new initiatives must be created means that reformers tend not to build on and further enhance the many successful programs that already exist.
 - a. Expand and adequately fund Care4Kids to create a "follow the child" or "purchase of service" model of funding early care and education for all at-risk children.
 - b. Expand and adequately fund DSS State Funded Child Development Centers.
4. Build quality with capacity. The key to expansion is maintaining concurrently a high level of quality care, and a program that serves the multidimensional needs of early childhood. Poor quality, in contrast, is detrimental to healthy development. Capacity cannot be expanded at the cost of quality. But it is equally true

²⁴According to DSS, the department's spending alone on child care declined from \$156 million in 1999 to \$96 million in 2005 – a 38% reduction not adjusted for inflation. *The Status of Child Care in Connecticut* (CT Department of Social Services, 1999 & 2005).

²⁵ See *Meeting the Need, Accepting the Challenge: The Connecticut Early Care and Education Cost Model* (The Early Care and Education Finance Project of the CT Early Childhood Alliance, 2005).

that quality cannot be improved at the expense of children's access to a preschool education. The system must be built in a way to support the growth of both capacity and quality, in partnership.

5. Equally fund all programs of comparable quality. Regardless of the funding source, all reimbursement rates must be set at a level adequate to cover the true cost of a quality program. Whether they are part of the SDE School Readiness program or a DSS State Funded Child Development Center, all programs of equal quality should receive equal payment and staff compensation equal to the quality and level of service provided.
6. Streamline the state payment process. Ensure ease of access and timely delivery of payment.
7. Erase artificial barriers in Connecticut early care policy between "preschool" and "child care." Remember that all early care is education; children are learning all the time. Additionally, most families need a practical answer to both their full day child care needs and their child's need for preschool education. Programs should be responsive to this need. Importantly, many children in Connecticut are receiving their preschool education in family, friend and neighbor care settings. Ensure that these children too are equally prepared for kindergarten as those in the state's child care centers.
8. Address infant and toddler care needs. Acknowledge the complementary need for infant and toddler care in a plan for universal access to preschool. Constructing a system that serves the needs of all preschoolers, at the expense of the availability or affordability of infant and toddler care, or that is not family friendly in its accessibility and ease for families with infants as well as preschoolers, is unacceptable. After all, the *greatest* learning occurs in a child's first three years.