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Testimony before the Committee on Education
Raised Bill No. 1106: An Act Concerning the Establishment of the Department of Early Education and Child Development
Submitted by Sherry Linton-Massiah
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March 7, 2011

Good afternoon, Senator Stillman, Representative Fleishman and distinguished members of the Education Committee. I am Sherry Linton, Early Care and Education Policy Analyst at the Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS). CAHS is a 100-year-old statewide nonprofit organization that works to end poverty and engage, empower, and equip all families in Connecticut to achieve financial security. CAHS is one of four state-wide advocacy organizations serving on the Steering Committee of the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in favor of H.B.1106: An Act Concerning the Establishment of the Department of Early Education and Child Development. CAHS strongly supports the intent of the bill to foster increased consolidation, streamlining, partnerships, and authority to the early care and education delivery system through the establishment of a Department of Early Education and Child Development.

Problem: The status quo lacks the level of coordination and streamlining of early care and education necessary for optimum outcomes for Connecticut's children and families.

At the onset one might equate the request for an additional state department as an implication of increased bureaucracy and spending, but in fact, the Department of Early Education and Child Development would result in the contrary. Currently, the delivery of early education and care services in Connecticut is overseen by seven different state agencies, including but not limited to, the Department of Education, the Department of Social Services, the Department of Developmental Services, the Department of Children and Families, the Department of Higher Education, and the Department of Public Health. These agencies oversee a patchwork of programs including School Readiness, State Funded Centers, Head Start, Family Resource Centers and Care 4 Kids, with a variety of funding streams and often duplicative reporting requirement. As such, the level of coordination necessary to ensure effective delivery of services to children and families is absent. With the status quo, requirements for quality standards also lack uniformity, ranging from basic licensing to mandatory accreditation. Data collection and

evaluation have also proven to lack the necessary coordination to facilitate a long overdue longitudinal study of outcomes from this patchwork of programs and services.

Current steps: We applaud the recommendation of the Governor for his recognized need for increased streamlining of child care services.

It is our belief that while the Governor's recommended shift of State Funded Centers from DSS to SDE reflects a step in the right direction of streamlining the delivery of early care and education, to most effectively execute a system of programs and services for the education and development of Connecticut's children, a stand-alone Department of Early Education and Development is needed. The breadth and precision needed to execute the kindergarten through high school system, for which SDE is currently responsible, is vast. To ensure that the early years, which are the most vulnerable and filled with the greatest opportunities for learning, receive the necessary supportive system of services, CAHS recommends the goal of this bill for a Department committed to that system of early care and education delivery.

Next Steps: CAHS also supports the recommendations of the bill for intentional partnerships, locally and at the state level, and the need for sufficient authority to be given to the proposed Department as a means to implement the comprehensive services necessary to maximize the preparedness of children and families for high achievement.

Improvement in the quality of life for Connecticut's children is strongly dependent on strong partnerships and systems that facilitate consistent dialogue between the infrastructure of programs providing services including educational, health, child welfare and mental health services to children and families. CAHS supports the recommended blueprint for that coordination of services as it is outlined in the bill. Likewise, the Department of Early Education and Child Development needs to be equipped with the authority to execute the fiscal decisions necessary to identify and respond to the needs of children and families.

Especially during these times when resources are sparse and the economy is unpredictable, coordinated partnerships are imperative. It is our hope that this Department embraces a diverse array of child care options to ensure that even the unconventional needs of children and families are being addressed. The successful delivery of services to maximize children's educational readiness is heavily dependent on effective braiding of programs such as Head Start, for very low-income families, to School Readiness that does not define eligibility based on income, with the realization that children in households with parents that work unconventional hours should also be able to access learning rich environments. The Department of Early Care and Child Development should at the very least be inclusive of care options ranging from publicly funded licensed programs, to private community child care centers, and family child care who accept state and/or federal funds. The establishment of the Department of Early Care and Child Development to provide central oversight of the range of service options would better enable the development and implementation of a standardized system for measuring quality.

The effectiveness of a centralized governance approach in the form of a Department for Early Education and Development has been developed and tested in a number of states including Massachusetts and North Carolina. Those states can be looked to as models and for lessons

learned in this process. CAHS supports the recommendations of this bill as it models after the Massachusetts governance structure. CAHS partners with the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance to commission national experts to educate stakeholders on the benefits of adopting the governance structure outlined in this bill.

As Connecticut continues on the trajectory toward the creation of a consolidated, streamlined, coordinated system of early care and education, it is necessary to be intentional in every step, knowing that the end goal will take on optimum form through an inclusive process with invitation of diverse community voices to the table to plan and implement.

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