

BUDGET/ECONOMY/TAXES

Early childhood: An effective long-term investment in Connecticut's children

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Usually, but especially when resources are limited, good investments are those that are based on research about what really works and have promise for making a positive and long-term impact. One of the state's recent examples of a good investment is the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood (<http://www.ct.gov/oec/site/default.asp>) (OEC). Unfortunately, budget proposals recommend decreasing, and in some cases ending, this positive long-term investment in order to create short-term savings.

As Connecticut's largest community foundation, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving strives to make these types of investments and has long prioritized high-quality early childhood programs and cross-sector collaborations in early childhood as effective strategies to promote children's healthy growth and development, their success in school and ultimately, to improve Connecticut's economy.

Since 1987, the Foundation has invested approximately \$40 million in early childhood in the Greater Hartford area, including grants totaling \$2.2 million in 2016 dedicated to specific early childhood interventions and system building in our region and statewide. Our early childhood work has included playing a significant role in the creation and support of the State Office of Early Childhood.

Gov. Dannel Malloy's administration created the OEC after extensive study of national and statewide research and an inclusive stakeholder process which concluded that a unified child and family-centered agency with an expert and dedicated focus on early childhood policy, funding and program quality is necessary to ensure optimal outcomes for children and pathways to economic security for their families. Research highlighting the benefits of this unified approach has not changed since the establishment of the OEC.

The Foundation has allocated its own resources, and worked in concert with statewide philanthropy through the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative, to support creation of the OEC. We commissioned an extensive study of national and statewide research and a stakeholder process that included early childhood experts, legislators, providers, parents, and philanthropy throughout the state. That study concluded that a unified early childhood agency centered on the needs of young children and families could do more for Connecticut than disparate programs across the State Department of Education and other state agencies.

Since its creation, the OEC has demonstrated positive benefits for Connecticut's young children, their families and those who support them. The OEC works with all parties – families, public and private providers, researchers, philanthropy, and federal and local government – to ensure a holistic and targeted emphasis on young children and their families.

The OEC has raised child care and preschool quality standards, linked local providers with critical professional development, and leveraged new federal investments in Connecticut. Moreover, philanthropy and the OEC continue to work together: in just the past year, we have worked to establish parallel municipal early childhood agencies to coordinate efforts, co-hosted financial workshops for providers after the closure of Care 4 Kids, and supported efforts to coordinate efforts between the OEC and other child and family state agencies.

This time of fiscal crisis heightens the importance of prioritizing strategies that *work* for those who need them the most. Though only a few years old, the OEC has a proven track record and a vision – a vision that may be more relevant now than ever. Focused attention to the development of young children is critical to support working families, improve readiness for learning in the early grades and beyond, and builds the strong workforce Connecticut needs.

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