

# Three on a Seesaw: Balancing Early Care and Education, Families, and the Economy

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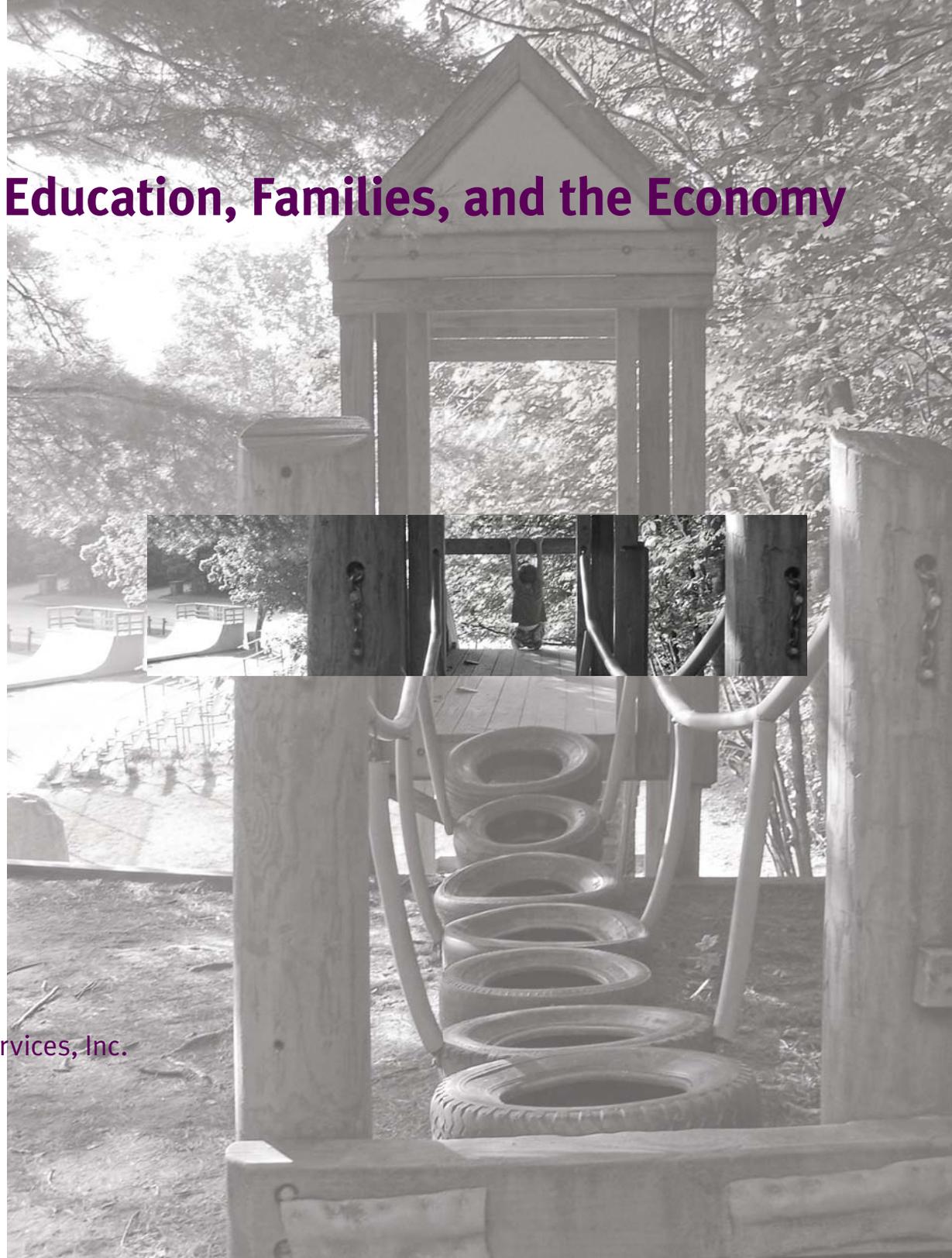
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## FOREWORD

The focus of the *2008-2009 Connecticut KIDS COUNT Data Book, Three on a Seesaw: Balancing Early Care and Education, Families, and the Economy*, was chosen to drive home the important connection between the state's economic well-being and the education and training level of the current and future workforce. Investments must be made at all phases of human development and learning—beginning at birth and moving along a continuum of preschool, K-12, postsecondary, and adult education and training.

*Three on a Seesaw* points to the need for a two-generational strategy that supports working parents and the social and educational needs of their young children.

Preschool education, child care for infants and toddlers, after-school programs for older children, and child care subsidies, *linked together*, are important in securing the present and the future workforce of the state. Connecticut policymakers will soon struggle to balance a budget deficit, the likes of which the state has never seen. As decisions are made, we cannot risk the chance that our current and future workforce will not be ready when the economy turns around.

A word about the data contained in the *2008-2009 Connecticut KIDS COUNT Data Book*. Of the 20 indicators reported, 16 are comparative, 3 provide baseline information from the 2000 Census (child population, child race and ethnicity, and child poverty), and one stands alone for informational purposes (Earned Income Tax Credit). At the state level, ten of the comparative indicators of child well-being show improvement, five show declines, and one stayed relatively the same when compared to the base year(s). Overall, improvements can be seen in HUSKY A and B enrollment, the high school dropout rate, the number of fourth-graders who met all goals on the Connecticut Mastery Tests, and the number of children enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly the Food Stamp Program.

As has been true historically, a different picture is revealed when we look at the town-level data. Indicators of child well-being continue to vary according to geography, which itself is often a proxy for income. Children in our three largest and poorest cities, Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven, continue to struggle. Children in our inner-ring suburbs, our rural areas, and some older industrial towns, on some indicators, are struggling as well. On other indicators, problems are apparent regardless of town residence.

All the indicators provide important information not only on child well-being but also, by implication, how we are doing in caring for our children. We hope this current edition of the *Connecticut KIDS COUNT Data Book* will guide policy development and help the reader understand the situation of children in every town across our state.

We thank our sponsors for their support and acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this data book are those of CAHS and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of these foundations and businesses.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD .....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
ESSAY: THREE ON AN SEESAW: BALANCING EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION, FAMILIES, AND THE ECONOMY .....	1
CONNECTICUT TOWN POPULATION ESTIMATES 2007 .....	7
CHAPTER ONE: DEMOGRAPHICS .....	9
CHILD POPULATION - CENSUS 2000 .....	10
CHILD RACE AND ETHNICITY - CENSUS 2000 .....	12
CHAPTER TWO: ECONOMIC SECURITY .....	15
CHILD POVERTY - CENSUS 2000 .....	16
CARE 4 KIDS - CHILD ENROLLMENT .....	18
EARNED INCOME TAX CREDIT (EITC) .....	20
TEMPORARY FAMILY ASSISTANCE - CHILD RECIPIENTS .....	22
SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) - CHILD RECIPIENTS .....	24
SCHOOL MEALS .....	26
CHAPTER THREE: EDUCATION .....	29
PREKINDERGARTEN EXPERIENCE .....	30
CONNECTICUT MASTERY TEST SCORES - 4TH GRADERS .....	32
CONNECTICUT ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE TEST SCORES - 10TH GRADERS .....	34
CUMULATIVE DROPOUT RATE .....	36
CHAPTER FOUR: HEALTH .....	39
LATE OR NO PRENATAL CARE .....	40
LOW BIRTHWEIGHT .....	42
INFANT MORTALITY (BIRTH TO ONE YEAR) .....	44
TEEN BIRTHS (AGES 15-17) .....	46
HUSKY A AND B (BIRTH TO 19) - CHILD ENROLLMENT .....	48
CHAPTER FIVE: SAFETY .....	50
SUBSTANTIATED CASES OF ABUSE AND/OR NEGLECT .....	52
CHILD DEATHS (AGES 1-14) .....	54
PREVENTABLE TEEN DEATHS (AGES 15-19) .....	56
SOURCES, METHODOLOGIES, AND SPECIAL NOTES .....	59



# Three on a Seesaw: Balancing Early Care and Education, Families, and the Economy

Connecticut and the nation are experiencing dizzying times. Maintaining the budget of a family or the state is always a balancing act, but as the economy spirals into free fall, policymakers and parents search for stable footing. Connecticut's leaders must weigh fiscal reality against long-term social and economic goals. Working parents must stretch shrinking dollars to meet the needs of their growing children. One area of family decision-making and spending that has great long-term impact on the present and future economy lies in the realm of child care and early education.

In the minds of many people, early childhood programs either help working parents or they prepare children for school. The arbitrary line is drawn between work supports and education. Public policy related to all aspects of child care and early education perpetuates this seesaw effect.

## In this essay, we discuss:

- The importance of taking the long view when deciding on state budget cuts to early care and education;
- The critical role early care and education programs play in the lives of children *and* working parents;
- The need to acknowledge that early care and education benefits both the present workforce and the future economy;
- The importance of quality in child care and early education; and
- A series of recommendations for now and when the economy begins to turn around.

## Decision-Making in Tough Times

In recent, more prosperous times, policymakers established priorities to improve the well-being of families and Connecticut's economy. Among them were: halving child poverty by 2014; investing in early care and education; expanding health care to children and parents; and building a skilled workforce.

Faced with a precipitous drop in state revenue and a budget deficit in the billions, policymakers must now make difficult decisions. When the state budget is developed and negotiated, Governor Rell and legislators should take the long view on budget priorities, preserving the integrity of programs that support their educational, family strengthening, and economic objectives.

Maintaining programs that support the present and future workforce is paramount so that when financial winds shift, Connecticut will be in a position to maximize its economic recovery. While positioning Connecticut for economic growth, it is also time to correct program flaws which limit outcomes that these programs are meant to achieve.

## The Importance of Early Care and Education

Early care and education (ECE) programs funded by Connecticut include infant-toddler care; School Readiness; Head Start; after-school care; Care 4 Kids, the Connecticut child care subsidy; and other services. ECE is founded on a two-generational strategy. While child care and the Care 4 Kids program help parents work, early education is designed to promote positive social-emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Historically, people who are unfamiliar with the care and education of young children think of these two tracts as separate. Researchers and early care and education teachers, however, acknowledge that the separation is artificial—high-quality child care is high-quality developmental education.

Program quality is the critical ingredient that unites care and education and benefits both parents and children. Often considered important in terms of a child's development, quality care is important to the well-being of working parents as well. When working parents feel their children are well-cared for and benefiting developmentally from the experience and knowledge of a well-qualified caregiver, they are less distracted and better able to be productive.

It has been shown that the defining elements of high-quality child development programs include:

- qualified and well-compensated personnel;
- small group sizes and high adult-child ratios;
- a language-rich environment;
- developmentally appropriate “curriculum”;
- a safe physical setting;
- warm and responsive adult-child interactions, and;
- high and consistent levels of child participation.<sup>1</sup>

These characteristics can be found in several program types. It is through the coupling of high quality care *and* education that the long-term potential of children in out-of-home care is enhanced.

## ECE: Supporting the Economy or the Family?

When parents look for child care and early education programs they often are faced with contradictory public policies. They might wish to find a full-day, full-year program of both care and education, but often these services are not easy to coordinate. K-12 educators emphasize the importance of children's exposure to a learning environment during the preschool years. But most working parents need child care as well as school readiness or a pre-K program.

As parents look for full-time child care, they may see high prices and little help with the cost of that care. Connecticut's school readiness policies raise the importance of preschool and minimize support for Care 4 Kids

and child care for other age groups. Similarly, parents' need for full-day, full-year child care raises their need for financial assistance and reduces their ability to purchase quality early care and education.

While Connecticut policymakers have endorsed and funded child care and early education programs for over 20 years, they have not overcome this seesaw effect. As a result, the quality and funding of early childhood programs, in general, are compromised. As a state, we are willing to invest in early education (but not fully) and reluctant to acknowledge that caregiving is relevant to learning as well. In reality, early childhood programs are not easily dissected. Care and education overlap, and we need to pay adequately for both.

Research shows that brain development and the foundations of learning are established in the first three years of life.<sup>2</sup> It also shows that the elastic brain continues to develop throughout life.<sup>3</sup> Along with drawing a line between education and care, we debate the optimal time to influence development and learning. Should we invest in public programs when children are three or four or during infancy? Whichever side of the debate has the most vocal proponents, by all estimates, our commitment to care and education *before kindergarten* is lukewarm at best. We are unwilling to financially stand behind one of the most important educational investments—one that could reduce remedial and other social costs for which we willingly pay.<sup>4</sup>

### *Perspective #1: Early Care and Education and the Economy*

In 2005, Governor Rell established the Connecticut Early Childhood Education Cabinet “to develop a framework for ensuring that all of the state’s young children enter school healthy and fully ready for school success and are reading at the state’s goal level by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.”<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the Cabinet’s deliberations and public documents, the link between early childhood education and preparation of a strong workforce

for the future is clearly articulated. Implicit in these statements is a call for a broader definition of economic development, one that acknowledges the interconnection between the skills of the labor force and the ability of the state to attract new business.<sup>6</sup>

Historically, Connecticut’s efforts to stimulate the economy have been directed primarily at the employer rather than employee. That has changed in recent years as policymakers have come to understand the connection between education and economic development. Efforts to engage high school students with science, technology, engineering, and math—the STEM professions—have increased in order to expand the number of young adults who can fill high-skill, high-paying jobs. The state has also obtained federal funds to provide adult workers with opportunities to pursue training in high-priority careers such as health care, construction trades, and precision manufacturing. These efforts are often referred to as improving “the talent pipeline.” Without greater attention to workforce training and education, it is feared Connecticut will not be able to compete with other states in the new economy.<sup>7</sup>

Analysts realize, however, that the state’s efforts to improve its workforce must begin earlier than K-12. To develop a talented pool of workers that appeal to new business, advocates and researchers are urging state leaders to expand their definition of economic development to include all phases of education, from birth through preschool to postsecondary and workforce development.<sup>8</sup>

### *Perspective #2: Early Care and Education and the Family*

For working parents, infant-toddler, child care, after-school and pre-K programs are essential to juggle work and family responsibilities and to educate and care for children. Unfortunately, the view of early education as a two-generational strategy has been forgotten. Our emphasis on school readiness or preschool policies and programs has meant that children younger and older than three and four are not receiving support for the development that occurs at these ages. Similarly, when child care subsidies

take a back seat to preschool programs, working poor parents are unable to get help with the cost of quality programs and so their ability to juggle work and family is diminished.

Especially for families living on income below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (\$42,400 for a family of four in 2008<sup>9</sup>), the high cost of child care and education competes with other major items in the family budget. In two parent-families, child care is sometimes managed by parents splitting first and second shift. Single parents often must resort to friend, family, or neighbor care, even if the commitment by the caregiver might waver from day to day.

### Balancing the Seesaw

For public policy to work effectively, program design must be enlarged so that benefits accrue to multiple beneficiaries. For example, an expanded definition of economic development that includes early education will answer some of the needs of employers, parents, children, and state government. We also must broaden the definition of a “talent pipeline” to include working parents and their children. Under this model: (1) working parents have access to quality full-day, full-year care and education and receive help with its cost; (2) children receive support for their long-term growth and learning; (3) employers have an attentive workforce now and can anticipate a skilled workforce in the future; and (4) governmental costs in the long run are reduced because public benefits are needed by fewer families and, over time, more workers are paying state taxes.

In order for Connecticut to maintain its economic footing and build for the future, policymakers should acknowledge the interconnection among families, early care and education, and a strong economy and commit the state to a more productive investment in families and children.

### A New Paradigm for a Troubled Economy

Over the past several years, many sectors have called on Connecticut policymakers to think more broadly when seeking answers to issues

### Did You Know?

- Between 2006 and 2007, the cost of child care in Connecticut for an infant or 4-year-old rose by 3 percent and 2.3 percent, respectively.
- Full-time care in a child care center for an infant averaged \$11,274.
- Full-time center care for a 4-year-old averaged \$9,111.
- For single parents with median income of \$28,385, the cost of infant care accounted for almost 40 percent of the family budget.
- Care for a 4-year-old for a single parent family with the same median income would take up 32 percent of the family budget.
- Care for infants and 4-year-olds in 2007 were both estimated to be significantly more than the average tuition and fees for a public college (\$7,586) in the state.<sup>10</sup>
- According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, federal, state, and local funding for early care and education along with parent fees are not adequate to provide quality programs (defined as programs in which teachers are adequately trained, educated, and compensated and have the possibility of career advancement).<sup>11</sup>

the state faces, such as slow economic and population growth, demographic changes, the high cost of living, the growing wealth gap, and compartmentalized governmental decision-making.<sup>12</sup> Breaking down government silos can produce policymaking that integrates multiple issue areas that, in real life, overlap and interconnect. If government thinks outside its established silos and “connects the dots,” families, business, and the economy will benefit. Effective public policies are needed to support the early education of children, help their parents work, and, simultaneously, prepare both for their roles in the workforce.

## Recommendations

Our recommendations address two time periods. The first recommendations can be implemented during the current fiscal crisis. The second set of recommendations should be implemented as the economy turns around.

### Stage One

- Maintain current funding for early education and child care programs, making only minimal cuts in areas where there will clearly be no harm done.
- In the spirit of Results-Based Accountability, which looks at outcomes and efficient spending, the time is right to make changes in design and regulations so that early care and education programs operate more effectively.

### Stage Two

- Increase the education and training of early educators to ensure that all children in out-of-home care and education programs, *regardless of setting*, receive high-quality developmentally appropriate support.
- Increase and equalize program reimbursement rates so that workforce salaries can be paid at levels commensurate with the quality of care and education we expect teachers to deliver.
- Increase financial support for infant and toddler care—that sector of early education that is the most costly, difficult to deliver, and critical to future learning.
- Align the eligibility standards for School Readiness and Care 4 Kids programs so that parents earning up to 85 percent of the state median income can receive help with the cost of child care and education.

These unprecedented economic times require budgetary decisions that are difficult to make and live with. As all members of our nation will be asked to share the burden of the financial crisis, we understand that all Connecticut residents must be ready to tighten our belts. Forgetting our previous commitments to the economy and to families is not inevitable, however. Connecticut policymakers can set priorities when cutting the budget. Investing in the current and future workforce will strengthen the state over the long term.

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