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EARLY CHILD CARE SUMMIT

BY TOM PHELAN ReminderNews

Teachers, care-givers and administrators in the early child care and education field gathered Feb. 6 at the first regional summit at Asnuntuck Community College in Enfield, with the hope of beginning to develop a vision for the future of early childhood education in north central Connecticut. The event was hosted by State Rep. Karen Jarmoc (D-59th District), who brought together partners from Key Initiatives to Early Education and the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance.

Jarmoc opened the half-day summit by telling those gathered that the current economy in the state is threatening the opportunity to fund and grow programs for the education and care of very young children. The effort at the Capitol in Hartford to cut spending and reduce the deficit specifically included community plans for early childhood, early literacy programs and the Office of Early Childhood Planning Outreach and Coordination.

Participants heard from David Nee, executive director of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, and Ann Pratt, executive director of the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance.

Nee was frank in his assessment of the progress Connecticut had made toward pursuing funding for early childhood education. He said that 18 months ago, Connecticut was regarded as leading the pursuit of federal funding for this area, but since had faded back into the pack. Nee said he was surprised to learn that the precursor application to federal Early Learning Challenge Grants had not yet been filed. "When it comes to Early Learning Challenge Grants, we need to be much better organized across sectors than we were for Race to the Top," Nee advised. (The Race to the Top is a \$4.35 billion fund designed to help states drive gains in student achievement by supporting those states that were making dramatic progress on four reform goals.)

There should be a sense of urgency at the state Capitol, according to Nee, as the second round of Race to the Top comes around. "There needs to be a dialogue between state education, the executive branch and the legislature... and it needs to begin immediately," he said.

Pratt framed the work of early childhood care and education for her audience, saying that it really should be looked at as an industry. That industry provides for 110,000 early care and education spaces. Of those "seats," 80 percent are paid for by parents, she said. There is, she felt, an economic driver that is being overlooked.

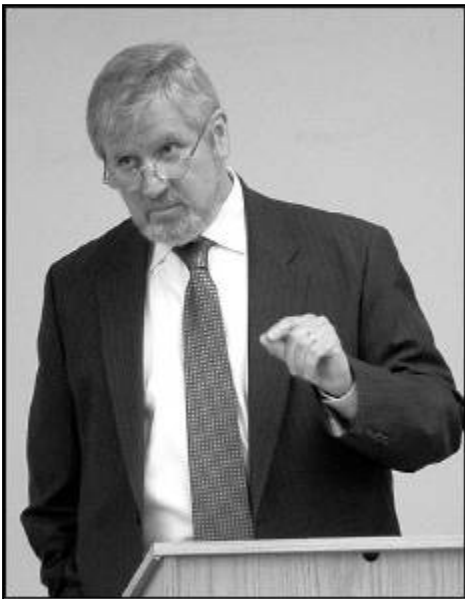
On the publicly-funded side of the industry – such programs as Head Start and Care4Kids – she explained, the percentage of the state's expenditures dedicated to the same industry is essentially infinitesimal – several decimal places to the right of 1 percent. "Frankly, from our perspective, it's way too small," she said. "You do yeoman's amount of work on very small amounts of money." She agreed with Jarmoc's assessment, "We have to protect and defend what we already have... and we have to create that broad vision for the long haul."

In her second part of the program, Pratt conducted an exercise called "What Does Victory Look Like?" It was an effort to draw out the audience's thoughts about their vision for the future of early childhood care and education. "I think when you ask about what victory is, it provides a different context," she said. She put it in terms of her own pursuit of marathon-running over the past eight years. Over that time, as she ran in different races, victory took on different meanings.

The exercise brought out a wide range of ideas across all aspects of the early childhood industry, with many of the attendees offering ideas. Pratt drew a very large circle on the white board, and began to fill the circle with the contributions. After 20 minutes of plotting ideas on the board, she said, "This is just a beginning... This is the kind of energy that can be created when you think, 'Wouldn't it be amazing if this could be created in our children's lives?'"



State Rep. Karen Jarmoc hosted the first summit of child care providers and educators from the area.





David Nee, executive director of the Graustein Memorial Fund, was one of the speakers. Photos by Tom Phelan. Ann Pratt, who heads up the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance, told the audience that they were part of an industry whose force as an economic driver is being overlooked.