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Preschoolers Feeling Effect of Budget Impasse – and it Could Get Worse

Parents, teachers, and children from Head Start programs in Danbury, New Britain, Norwich, Waterbury, Hartford, and Bristol suffer from on-going budget stalemate



Senator Williams speaks out in support of Head Start, Family Resource Centers and early childhood education, and against Governor Rell's cuts to those programs. (August 25, 2009)

Senate President Donald E. Williams, Jr. (D-Brooklyn) and Speaker of the House Christopher G. Donovan (D-Meriden) joined Joan Karlsen—CT Head Start Association Executive Director; Juleen Flanagan—Co-chair CT Early Childhood Alliance; and parents, teachers, and children from Head Start programs across the state at a news conference at the Capitol to detail how the on-going budget impasse has—and will continue to—affect thousands of preschoolers.

Early childhood advocates say that with each passing day of the state budget impasse, early care and education programs that serve children throughout Connecticut are being forced to remove children from their rolls or risk financial collapse.

“Right now is when childhood education programs are finalizing their budget and staffing for the next year”, said Senator Williams. “Instead of preparing the new school year, families face uncertainty and teachers are being laid off. All this can be avoided with a smart and fair budget that cuts spending, preserves critical services, and asks our wealthiest residents to pay just a little more.”

"The Governor's continuing refusal to ask the wealthiest residents of Connecticut to pay just \$20 a week is inflicting pain on thousands in our state," said House Speaker Donovan. "Preschoolers, and their parents and teachers, should not be made to suffer from cruel and unnecessary budget cuts when those who can afford to contribute more are given a free pass."

The Governor's budget allotments for July and August have zeroed out some early childhood programs and underfunded others, forcing the closure of many early childhood classrooms and services across the state. Children enrolled in Head Start, School Readiness and Family Resource Center programs have been hit hardest.

According to Voice for Children, in July, Family Resource Centers began closing programs when their funding was zeroed out for the month. Several Head Start classes have closed down, leaving at least 200 children without services, as a result of the zero funding in the latest allotments. And last week, School Readiness programs across the state were underpaid for services already rendered.

“I am deeply concerned about the impact this funding shortage will have on Connecticut's early care and education programs,” says Sherry Linton, early care and education policy analyst at the Connecticut Association of Human Services. “Programs like School Readiness, Head Start and Family Resource Centers are the backbone of a system intended to send children to school ready to learn, strengthen families and build a future skilled workforce.”

The Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance, whose members teach and care for over 20,000 Connecticut children, expressed worry about the funding instability created in the absence of a budget.

“Programs don’t know if they will be in business next month, and parents don’t know if they’ll have a place to send their children while they work. Budget stalemate or not, children shouldn’t be left in limbo,” says Karen Rainville, executive director of CT Association for the Education of Young Children.

Key Differences between the governor’s budget and the Democrats’ budget:

Family Resources Centers were funded @ \$6.36 million in FY09.

- The legislature has proposed cutting this to \$6.04 million, while the Governor wants to slash the program to \$4.52 million (a cut of almost 30 percent).

Head Start (State Head Start, Head Start Enhancement, and Head Start Early Childhood Link) was funded by the state at \$6.72 million in FY09.

- The legislature has worked to preserve this funding while the Governor wants to slash the program to \$5.56 million (a cut of almost 20 percent).

The Governor's proposed cuts to Head Start funding are particularly concerning because they may jeopardize \$52 million in federal funds. The federal government requires Head Start programs to match a fraction of the \$52 million that it gives them, and programs historically have used state funds this way.