
OLR Bill Analysis

sHB 5051

AN ACT ESTABLISHING EARLY START CT.

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Allows the OEC commissioner to issue a license to maintain a family child care home to a town in New London County, and moves out the expiration date for all of the licenses the OEC commissioner issued under the family child care home license expansion from June 30, 2026, to June 30, 2028

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BACKGROUND

SUMMARY

This bill makes the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) responsible for operating and administering a state-funded early care and education system to coordinate and facilitate efficient delivery of early childhood care ("Early Start CT") and establishes policies and procedures for program operation and administration. It also makes related minor, technical, and conforming changes.

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2026, unless otherwise noted below.

§§ 1 & 2 — PURPOSE OF EARLY START CT

Makes OEC responsible for operating and administering a state-funded early care and education system to coordinate and facilitate efficient delivery of early childhood care (“Early Start CT”)

The bill makes OEC responsible for operating and administering a state-funded early care and education system to coordinate and facilitate efficient delivery of early childhood care (“Early Start CT”) to (1) provide open access for infants and toddlers and pre-school age children to high quality programs that promote the health and safety of children and prepare them for school, and (2) prevent or minimize the potential for developmental delay in children before age five.

The bill also requires OEC to operate Early Start CT to facilitate the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of the children, families, and staff in Early Start CT programs.

Service Coordination

Under the bill, Early Start CT must encourage coordination and cooperation among programs and prevent the duplication of services and recognize the specific service needs and unique resources available to particular municipalities. The office must also improve the availability and quality of Early Start CT programs and their coordination with the services of child care providers.

Impact on Families

The bill requires Early Start CT to provide opportunities for parents to choose among affordable, accredited (e.g., National Association for the Education of Young Children or National Association for Family Child Care), and Head Start approved programs and strengthen families through encouragement of family engagement and partnership in a child’s development and education.

Under the bill, Early Start CT must also enhance a family’s capacity to meet the special needs of the children, including children with disabilities. It also must assure that children with disabilities are integrated into programs available to children who do not have disabilities.

Funding

The bill requires Early Start CT to maximize local and federal early childhood education funding to expand capacity and access, and to reduce educational costs by decreasing the need for special education services for school-age children.

§ 3 — SLIDING FEE SCALE

Requires OEC to establish a sliding fee scale for families participating in Early Start CT

The bill requires OEC to establish a sliding fee scale for families participating in Early Start CT. The fee scale must be based on family income and align with the existing Care 4 Kids sliding fee scale.

§ 4 — POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Requires OEC to implement (1) policies and procedures necessary to administer Early Start CT, (2) infant and toddler and school-age ratios and group size requirements, and (3) head teacher staffing requirements; requires existing ratios, group size requirements, and staffing requirements to remain applicable until replaced by policies and procedures OEC implements while adopting regulations

The bill requires the OEC commissioner to implement (1) policies and procedures necessary to administer the bill's provisions, (2) infant and toddler and school-age ratios and group size requirements, and (3) head teacher staffing requirements for programs serving only school-age children, while in the process of adopting these policies and procedures in regulations.

Under the bill, any existing regulations relating to infant and toddler and school-age ratios, group size requirements, and head teacher staffing requirements for programs serving only school-age children that are generally applicable to child care centers and group child care homes must remain applicable until replaced by the policies and procedures this section describes.

The bill requires the OEC commissioner to post notice of the intent to adopt regulations on OEC's website and the eRegulations System within 20 days after implementing them. The policies and procedures are valid until regulations are adopted.

§ 5 — FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Allows eligible entities to enter into a contract with OEC to receive state financial assistance to operate early childhood care and education programs; establishes eligibility requirements and allows the OEC commissioner to consider certain criteria when determining eligibility; requires any contract to be made contingent upon available funding and a successful application to an OEC-issued RFP; requires OEC to allocate a certain amount of funding for coordination, program evaluation, and administration; and creates per-child and per-classroom rates for assistance by age

Eligibility Requirements

The bill allows the following eligible entities to enter into a contract with OEC to receive state financial assistance: municipalities, local and regional boards of education, regional education service centers (RESCs), family resource centers, Head Start programs, preschool programs, nonprofit organizations, child care centers, group or family child care homes, and any other program that meets the commissioner's standards. The assistance is for operating early childhood care and education programs that focus on providing access to these programs based on economic, social, or environmental conditions, including in regions with insufficient access to child care.

Under the bill, to receive this financial assistance (1) a child care center or group or family child care home must be licensed by the OEC commissioner and (2) a local or regional board of education or RESC must be approved by the state Department of Education.

Under the bill, at least 60% of eligible children participating in Early Start CT and enrolled in a child care center or group or family child care home must be members of a family that is at or below 75% of the state median income.

The bill requires the majority of programs eligible for the financial assistance to serve children that reside in, or attend programs located in, priority school districts, former priority school districts, or towns with schools deemed severe need schools because 40% or more of the lunches served are served to students eligible for free or reduced priced lunches.

The bill allows the OEC commissioner, when determining eligibility for financial assistance, to consider (1) a community's Care 4 Kids participation and (2) the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) social vulnerability index as the census tract determines. The

index may include a review of a community's indices of social, economic, racial, housing, transportation, and household characteristics as the CDC determines.

Request for Proposals (RFP)

The bill requires any contract to be made contingent upon available funding and a successful application to an OEC-issued RFP informed by the appropriate local governance partner's needs assessment and community plan (see § 8). The bill exempts from the RFP requirement any Early Start CT facility that has (1) been approved to operate a child care program financed through the Connecticut Health and Education Facilities Authority (CHEFA) and (2) received a commitment for debt service from the Department of Social Services on or before June 30, 2014, and from OEC on or after July 1, 2014.

Funding for Program Administration and Operation

Under the bill, OEC must allocate an amount up to 5% of the total funding for each town or city or the participating towns or cities in the case of a regional application, but no more than \$75,000 per town or city for coordination, program evaluation, and administration. The bill requires the allocated amount to be increased by an amount equal to local funding provided for early childhood education coordination, program evaluation, and administration, not to exceed \$25,000.

The bill prohibits any Early Start CT program that receives funds from discriminating based on ancestry; race; color; national origin; sex; gender identity or expression; sexual orientation; religion; learning, physical, intellectual, or mental disability; or any other protected class. It also prohibits funds received from being used to supplant federal, state, or local funding received for early childhood education on behalf of children in an early childhood education program.

The bill allows OEC to use up to 2% of funds allocated to the early care and education appropriation to evaluate program effectiveness and impact on participating children, families, and programs, including (1) child outcomes, (2) later school performance, (3) quality standards, (4) professional development and preparation, and (5) parent engagement

impact.

Per-Child and Per-Classroom Rate

The bill allows OEC to pay, in an individual contract for FY 27, a per-child rate or an equivalent per-classroom rate that the commissioner determines.

Under the bill, OEC must pay, for each eligible child enrolled in an Early Start CT program, a per-child cost of at least:

1. \$10,500 for each child aged three or four, or aged five and not eligible to enroll in school, or an equivalent rate and amount per classroom for 18 children; or
2. \$13,500 for each child under age three who is in toddler or infant care and not in a preschool program, or an equivalent rate and amount per classroom for eight children.

The bill requires OEC to use data-driven, outcomes-based contract provisions to facilitate and incentivize full enrollment.

§ 6 — UNEXPENDED FUNDS

Allows up to \$1 million in unexpended Early Start CT funds, beginning FY 26, to be used to (1) provide professional development for early childhood care and education program providers or (2) support early childhood education programs in satisfying staff qualification requirements

The bill allows, for FY 26 and each fiscal year after, up to \$1 million in unexpended Early Start CT funds to be available for:

1. providing professional development for early childhood care and education program providers, and staff employed in these programs, as long as these programs accept state funds for infant, toddler, and preschool slots; and
2. supporting early childhood education programs in satisfying the staff qualification requirements, as long as these programs accept state funds.

The bill requires the OEC commissioner to determine how the unexpended funds are distributed.

Under the bill, with the consent of the Office of Policy and Management secretary, any unexpended funds that OEC does not distribute may be used for the following:

1. assisting programs in meeting and maintaining accreditation requirements;
2. providing training in implementing preschool assessments and curricula;
3. developing and implementing best practices for parents in supporting preschool and kindergarten student learning;
4. developing and implementing strategies for children to successfully transition to preschool and from preschool to kindergarten, including through parental engagement and whole-family supports that may be used through the two-generational initiative or other available resources; and
5. providing professional development.

§ 7 — ACCREDITATION REQUIREMENTS

Generally requires any program participating in Early Start CT to be accredited or approved within three years of entering into an OEC contract

The bill requires any program participating in Early Start CT to be accredited or Early Head Start or Head Start approved within three years of entering a contract with OEC. Under the bill, any program not accredited must have an approved program plan within 12 months of entering into a contract with OEC.

§ 8 — LOCAL GOVERNANCE PARTNERS

Requires local governance partners to represent each community receiving Early Start CT funds and the membership of each local governance partner to reflect the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic composition of the town or region it serves and to consist of early care and education stakeholders; requires each local governance partner to (1) conduct a data-driven needs assessment for the town or region the partner serves and (2) employ a staff liaison

The bill requires local governance partners be established, within available appropriations, to assist in providing early care and education in a community under Early Start CT. The bill allows two or more towns

or school districts and appropriate representatives of groups or entities interested in early childhood education in a region to establish a regional governance partner. It requires OEC to monitor each local or regional governance partner for compliance with the bill's provisions.

Membership

The bill requires the membership of each local or regional governance partner to reflect the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic composition of the town or region it serves. Membership must consist of early care and education stakeholders, including the following:

1. elected and appointed officials;
2. parents;
3. representatives with expertise in early childhood education;
4. a Smart Start representative, where applicable;
5. local education and healthcare providers in the community;
6. a local homeless education liaison;
7. community representatives from workforce or job training entities; and
8. other community representatives who provide services to children.

Role and Responsibilities

Under the bill, a local or regional governance partner must do the following:

1. conduct and administer a data-driven needs assessment for its respective community or region (see below),
2. employ strategies to solicit parental engagement and membership,
3. provide periodic technical assistance on best practices in early

childhood and family engagement for its town or region,

4. jointly sponsor professional development opportunities with OEC, and
5. ensure that community outreach is regularly conducted and maintained with community stakeholders.

The bill also requires each local or regional governance partner to designate a staff person to be responsible for early childhood program coordination, program evaluation, and administration and to act as a liaison between participating towns and the commissioner.

Data-Driven Needs Assessment

The bill requires each local or regional governance partner, within available appropriations, to conduct a data-driven needs assessment for the town or region the partner serves. The needs assessment must include recommendations for the preferred distribution and allocation of child care spaces in the partner's respective town or region, and subject to OEC's approval, may include a data-driven methodology to reassign child care spaces before the contract date lapses.

Under the bill, OEC must create the needs assessment in collaboration with communities. The assessment must directly inform, among other things, child care space assignment across a mixed delivery system, including licensed family child care providers, group child care homes, child care centers, and license-exempt public schools.

Staff Liaison

The bill requires each local or regional governance partner to hire a staff liaison to aid and support the partner in implementing this section's provisions and ensure collaboration with OEC related to planning improvements to the state early care and education governance structure. The staff liaison must also ensure that:

1. partnerships are established and fostered among child care providers,

2. cooperation is maintained with OEC in monitoring and evaluating child care programs,
3. existing and potential resources and services available to children are identified,
4. recommendations are made to school officials about transition from child care programs to preschool programs and kindergarten,
5. effective community engagement strategies are used to ensure diverse participation, and
6. biannual child assessments OEC approves are performed at programs and done in partnership with families.

The staff liaison must also ensure (1) an information exchange with other community organization serving children's and families' needs and (2) facilitation and coordination of efficient, data-driven delivery of services to children and families, including referral procedures and before and after school child care for children attending school day and school year programs.

§ 9 — COMPETITIVE GRANT PROGRAM

Requires the OEC commissioner to establish a state-funded competitive program in which contracts are entered into with federal Head Start grantees to improve and increase access to Early Head Start and Head Start programs

The bill requires the OEC commissioner, as part of Early Start CT, to establish a state-funded competitive grant program for nonprofit agencies and local and regional boards of education that are federal Head Start grantees, to assist with enhancing program quality and increasing the:

1. number of children served in programs that are both a Head Start program and Early Head Start grantee or delegate,
2. number of Early Head Start children served above those who are federally funded, and

3. hours for children currently receiving Early Head Start services.

Additionally, it requires the grant program to assist with establishing extended-day and full-day, year-round, Head Start programs or expanding existing Head Start programs to extended-day or full-day, year round programs.

Under the bill, nonprofit agencies or boards of education seeking grants must apply to the commissioner on forms and at times the commissioner prescribes. The bill allows the commissioner to adopt regulations to establish the grant program.

The bill requires the commissioner to include contract provisions requiring at least 25% of funding to be used to enhance program quality. Contracts must be funded within available appropriations, or from federal funds and private donations, and all Head Start programs funded under the bill must comply with federal Head Start performance standards.

§ 10 — ALLOCATION OF FUNDS TO RESCS

Allows the OEC commissioner to allocate funds to RESCs to provide (1) professional development services, (2) technical assistance and evaluation, and (3) program planning and implementation activities, and other entities

The bill authorizes the OEC commissioner, within available appropriations, to allocate funds to RESCs to provide professional development services, technical assistance and evaluation, and program planning and implementation activities; local and regional boards of education; child care centers; group and family child care homes; and other early childhood care and education entities as the commissioner determines.

Under the bill, any funds the commissioner allocates must be spent according to procedures and conditions the commissioner sets.

§§ 11 & 12 — CHILD CARE HOMES AND CENTERS FOR DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

Maintains current per-child grant amounts in FY 24 for certain children and requires OEC to pay in an individual grant a per-child rate, or an equivalent per classroom rate, that the commissioner determines for FYs 25 and 26

By law, the state, through the OEC commissioner, may enter into contracts that provide state financial assistance (i.e., grants) to municipalities, human resource development agencies, nonprofit corporations, or group or family child care homes for developing and operating child care homes or centers for disadvantaged children. Existing law requires that these contracts with the state provide for a grant, within available appropriations, for an amount at least equal to the per child cost set in state law for each child aged three to five not yet eligible to enroll in school.

The bill maintains the above-described grant through the end of FY 24, and requires OEC, for FYs 25 and 26, to pay in an individual contract or a grant, a per-child rate, or an equivalent per-classroom rate, in an amount the commissioner determines.

Under the bill, the per-child cost must be at least:

1. \$10,500 for each child aged three or four, or aged five and not eligible to enroll in school, or an equivalent rate and amount per classroom for 18 children; or
2. \$13,500 for each child under age three who is in toddler or infant care and not in a preschool program, or an equivalent rate and amount per classroom for eight children.

The bill requires OEC to use data-driven, outcomes-based contract provisions to facilitate and incentivize full enrollment.

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2024

§§ 13 & 14 — SCHOOL READINESS PROGRAM PER CHILD COST LIMITATIONS

Extends the FY 25 cap on the per-child cost of OEC's school readiness program through FY 26; requires OEC's annual Head Start and Early Head Start grant allocations for FYs 25 and 26 to be in an amount determined under the per-child cost OEC is required to pay under § 11 of the bill

The bill extends the FY 25 cap on the per-child cost (i.e., \$10,500) of OEC's school readiness program through FY 26, and the bill requires the cap to be in accordance with the per-child cost OEC is required to pay

under § 11 of the bill.

Current law requires OEC to annually allocate \$150,000 plus \$8.50 for each child to each town that has at least 900 children receiving temporary family assistance for Head Start and Early Head Start programs. The bill replaces this allocation for FYs 2025 and 2026 with an allocation to be in an amount determined in accordance with the per-child cost OEC is required to pay under § 11 of the bill.

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2024

§ 15 — FAMILY CHILD CARE HOME LICENSE EXPANSION

Allows the OEC commissioner to issue a license to maintain a family child care home to a town in New London County, and moves out the expiration date for all of the licenses the OEC commissioner issued under the family child care home license expansion from June 30, 2026, to June 30, 2028

Under current law, the OEC commissioner may issue family child care home licenses in seven specified municipalities to a person or group of people, in a partnership with an association, organization, corporation, institution, or public or private agency, to provide child care services in a commissioner-approved space outside of a family home. These licenses must be issued following existing law.

The bill also allows the commissioner to issue these licenses for a town in New London County, and appears to move out the expiration date for all of these licenses by two years from June 30, 2026, to June 30, 2028. (However, the bill also retains a requirement that the licenses expire on June 30, 2026.)

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2024

§ 16 — REPEALER

Repeals various sections related to school readiness programs in light of the bill establishing Early Start CT

The bill makes conforming changes by repealing several early childhood statutes that relate to the following:

1. state grants for planning, constructing, renovating, developing, and operating licensed child care centers, group child care

- homes, and family child care homes (CGS § 8-210);
2. various school readiness provisions, including (a) OEC's Head Start and Early Head Start competitive grant program, (b) state financial assistance and eligibility for funding school readiness programs, and (c) school readiness program requirements, including per child cost limitations and sliding fee scale requirements (CGS §§ 10-16n to 10-16r);
 3. participation by five-year-old children in school readiness programs (CGS § 10-16t);
 4. school readiness program grants in transitional school districts (CGS § 10-16u);
 5. the competitive district grant account (CGS § 10-16aa);
 6. early childhood teacher credentialing (CGS § 10-520b);
 7. school readiness provider grants (CGS § 17b-749a); and
 8. licensed child care center sliding fee scales (CGS § 17b-749d).

BACKGROUND

Related Bills

sSB 286, favorably reported by the Education Committee, has a substantially similar provision allowing the OEC commissioner to issue a family child care home license to a town in New London County. The bill also prohibits the commissioner from issuing more than 20 licenses under the family child care license expansion, eliminates the license expiration date of June 30, 2026, and requires licenses to be issued for four-year terms.

sSB 249, favorably reported by the Commerce Committee, prohibits the OEC commissioner from issuing more than 20 licenses under the family child care license expansion, and eliminates the license expiration date of June 30, 2026.

COMMITTEE ACTION

Education Committee

Joint Favorable Change of Reference - APP
Yea 45 Nay 0 (03/06/2024)

Appropriations Committee

Joint Favorable Substitute
Yea 52 Nay 0 (04/04/2024)