

Education Committee
Public Hearing
March 19, 2025

Support and Comments for SB 1: An Act Increasing Resources For Students, Schools and Special Education and SB 1511: An Act Concerning Disconnected Youth

Dear Co-Chair Senator McCrory, Co-Chair Representative Leeper, Vice Chair Senator Winfield, Vice Chair Representative Brown, Ranking Member Senator Berthel, Ranking Member Representative Zupkus, and members of the Education Committee,

My name is Ashley Gaudiano, Chief Operating Officer at United Way of Coastal and Western Connecticut (UWCWC), and **I am testifying to provide comments on SB 1 and SB 1511.** In this capacity, I oversee our Family Child Care Initiative, Cora's Kids, serve as co-chair of the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative, a member of the CT Early Childhood Alliance, and Opportunity Youth Initiative. At UWCWC, we are deeply committed to ensuring that all children and families have equitable access to the resources and opportunities they need to thrive—from early childhood through adulthood.

At UWCWC, we serve 27 towns across Fairfield and Southern Litchfield County. Here, 42% of households—more than 336,000 individuals—live at or below the **ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed)** threshold. These individuals and families struggle daily to pay for essentials such as housing, food, transportation, child care, healthcare, and utilities. We also serve as the backbone for three StriveTogether Cradle to Career Collective Impact Initiatives – Bridgeport Prospers, Danbury Collective, and Stamford Cradle to Career.

Through our programs, partnerships, and investments, we work to strengthen the systems that support children and families at every stage of life. We advocate for high-quality, affordable early care and education, expanded opportunities for youth, and policies that create economic stability. By collaborating with nonprofits, businesses, and policymakers, we aim to remove barriers and create pathways for long-term success.

SB 1 Early Care and Education Comments

Thank you for prioritizing Early Childhood Education and your commitment to fund \$300 million this year and the unappropriated surplus in coming years. We appreciate the recognition that child care is a critical investment in children, families, and the workforce.

While the intent of SB 1 is positive, as currently written, it presents challenges that could have unintended consequences for families and early childhood providers. To truly address the needs of Connecticut's families, we must take a holistic approach—one that not only makes care more affordable for parents but also ensures child care providers receive fair wages and benefits.

The bill prioritizes pre-K in public schools without investing in full-day, full-year community-based programs that working families rely on. It expands new initiatives before existing programs are adequately funded, and it directs subsidies in ways that may primarily benefit higher-income families already in care rather than those currently priced out.

IMPROVING LIVES IN

Greater Bridgeport

10 Middle Street, Suite 1101 Bridgeport, CT 06604
Tel: 203.334.5106 Fax: 203.334.3297

Northern Fairfield County

301 Main Street, Suite 2-5 Danbury, CT 06810
Tel: 203.792.5330 Fax: 203.967.9507

Southern Litchfield County

24 Bank Street, P.O. Box 29 New Milford, CT 06776
Tel: 860.354.8800

Stamford and Greater Norwalk

1150 Summer Street Stamford, CT 06905
Tel: 203.348.7711 Fax: 203.967.9507



At UWCWC, we see firsthand how critical early childhood investments are through our Cora's Kids initiative. Since 2018, Cora's Kids has expanded access to high-quality, affordable home-based child care in Greater Danbury and Greater New Milford by helping providers obtain licensing, access professional development, and grow their businesses. These community-based providers offer full-day, full-year care that meets the needs of working families.

Most critically, SB 1 focuses on reducing costs for parents without addressing the child care workforce crisis. Without competitive wages and benefits for early childhood educators, the system will remain unstable—making care less accessible for all families. Sustainable investment has to focus on both affordability and workforce stability to create a system that works for everyone.

While we welcome efforts to lower the cost of care, this bill leaves behind the very families who need it most: low- to moderate-income parents already priced out of care and the dedicated workforce struggling with inadequate wages and benefits. By prioritizing public school and TriShare programs first, community-based provider subsidies are delayed, forcing many working families onto the Care4Kids wait list for years—while higher-income families with existing care receive financial relief. Without direct investment in wages and benefits, early childhood educators will continue to struggle, and the system will remain fragile.

To ensure that all families—especially those most in need—have access to high-quality, affordable child care, we urge the legislature to:

- Prioritize investments that support full-day, full-year community-based programs, not just school-day pre-K.
- Ensure subsidies reach families currently priced out of care, not just those already enrolled.
- Address the workforce crisis by increasing wages and benefits for early childhood educators.
- Take a measured, evidence-based approach to expanding new programs like TriShare.

Through Cora's Kids, we have seen the impact that targeted investments in early childhood education can have on families and providers alike. We urge the legislature to refine SB 1 to ensure that all children, families, and early educators receive the support they need.

SB 1 and SB 1511 - Opportunity Youth Support

Thank you for investing in critical strategies to address youth disconnection. Over 100,000 Connecticut youth (ages 14–26) face barriers to education, work, and stability, limiting their future opportunities. Every young person deserves the chance to thrive.

UWCWC and our Connecticut Cradle to Career Coalition, alongside partners including the Opportunity Youth Initiative at the Campaign for Working Connecticut, Dalio Education, and the CT Conference of Municipalities, are committed to reengaging disconnected youth through education, workforce development, and community support. We have solutions to solve this crisis, but we need strong policies to make it happen.

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SB 1 and SB 1511 align with our coalition’s mission. SB 1 strengthens education by addressing chronic absenteeism and launching student success programs, while SB 1511 expands mental health access and directs youth employment and training funds to regional workforce boards, ensuring resources reach those who need them most.

We urge policymakers to support these measures and continue investing in comprehensive strategies that connect youth to opportunity and long-term success.

We must invest in both Early Childhood Education and Opportunity Youth initiatives to ensure that every child and youth, regardless of income, has the opportunity to thrive in our state from cradle to career. With targeted improvements, SB 1 and SB 1511 can help create lasting pathways to youth success. We urge your support—Connecticut’s future depends on it.

Thank you,

Ashley Gaudiano
Chief Operating Officer
United Way of Coastal and Western Connecticut

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