

Themes from the ECE Endowment Advisory Board Annual Public Hearing: December 10, 2025

This document synthesizes themes from live verbal testimony and written submissions provided to the Connecticut Early Childhood Education (ECE) Endowment Advisory Board for a public hearing on December 10, 2025. The summary captures perspectives raised by stakeholders, including providers, families, advocates, community organizations, and elected officials.

Theme 1: Broad Support for the Endowment's Vision, Coupled with Urgency About Timing

Speakers expressed strong appreciation for Connecticut's leadership and the bold vision of the ECE Endowment and Early Start CT. State legislators, advocacy organizations, providers, parents, and researchers described the Endowment as a historic investment in Connecticut's early childhood system. Several testimonies underscored early positive impacts already being felt by families in Early Start CT.

At the same time, speakers expressed concerns that the benefits of the Endowment and Early Start CT for many families and providers are still several years away while the current system remains under acute strain. Speakers emphasized the importance of stabilizing the current early childhood education system while implementing the long-term vision, warning that without sustained annual investments, contingency planning, and near-term relief, the promise of the legislation may not be realized.

"The Early Childhood Education Endowment matters because it represents something we rarely get in this field: long-term security. Not temporary relief. Not a quick fix. But real investment in the future of early learning and the people who make it possible." — Lushanna Thompson, FCC provider

"What Connecticut has done in ECE over the last two legislative sessions is to be applauded. The state's system is arguably the most comprehensive in the country. What contingency plans can be instituted now to ensure long-term stability?" — Ruchi Sheth, Connecticut Voices for Children

Theme 2: Care 4 Kids is a Critical but Fragile Part of the Current System

Testimony reinforced that the Care 4 Kids program remains a central subsidy supporting family access to care and provider sustainability, while also facing capacity and operational challenges.

Key points raised included:

- Families are facing extended waits of six months or more for Care 4 Kids, forcing them to delay employment or leave the workforce.
- Providers are subsidizing care while families wait, often accepting partial or no payment, which can destabilize them as small businesses by causing them to lay off critical workers, have unfilled spaces, or go out of business entirely.
- In regions without sufficient Early Start CT access, Care 4 Kids remains the only viable option.

Speakers encouraged the State to stabilize and adequately fund Care 4 Kids, particularly during the transition to Early Start CT, and emphasized that clearer alignment and communication across subsidy programs would significantly improve family access. An example included establishing unified, user-friendly enrollment and navigation systems across Early Start CT and Care 4 Kids.

"Families are waiting six to nine months for Care 4 Kids approval. For a small family child care program, one or two empty seats can push you to the edge of closure." — Laura Brown, FCC provider

“I have parents who did everything right, followed every step, and waited so long that they lost their jobs. These are not numbers; they’re real families.” — Francheska Velazquez, center director

Theme 3: Workforce Crisis: Recruitment, Retention, and Compensation

Testimony illustrated workforce recruitment and retention challenges through the recounting of lived experience across the mixed delivery ECE system. Speakers emphasized that compensation and benefits remain misaligned with the responsibilities, qualifications, and expectations placed on early childhood educators.

Key concerns included:

- Experienced educators earning near-minimum wages, even with formal credentials and years in the field, contributing to financial insecurity and reliance on public assistance.
- Persistent vacancies with few or no qualified applicants —even in long-standing programs — limiting program capacity, increasing wait times for families, and constraining expansion efforts.
- High staff turnover driven by low pay and lack of benefits, which disrupts continuity of care, weakens staff-child relationships, and places strain on remaining staff and program leadership.

Speakers consistently called for reimbursement rates that support competitive compensation and workforce stability, access to health insurance and retirement benefits, and clear career pathways so early childhood education is treated as a viable, long-term profession.

“My classroom generates so much money in tuition, but I still need a second job to make ends meet...I love my job, and yet I cannot afford to do it.” — Ashley Barry, Pre-K teacher and parent

“According to the State of CT, I was below poverty level while working a full-time job with a college degree and two decades of professional experience.” — Sarah Gautie-Ferreira, early childhood educator

“We cannot expect quality without valuing the people who provide it. Competitive, stable compensation means we can recruit and retain skilled teachers who build strong relationships with children and deliver the level of care families deserve.” — Shannon Knudsen, center director

Theme 4: Family Child Care (FCC) Needs Targeted, Equitable Support

Testimony reinforced that many FCC providers, both long-standing and newly licensed, face distinct barriers that affect their sustainability.

Common themes included:

- Perceived unequal access to contracts, grants, loans, and relief funding, including capital for facilities, due to complex requirements and administrative barriers.
- Financial vulnerability, particularly given heavy reliance on Care 4 Kids.
- Market pressures, including competition with larger programs and limited ability to absorb enrollment changes, that can disadvantage small, home-based providers.

Speakers emphasized the importance of simpler, more equitable access for FCC providers to funding, along with targeted supports that support both entry into the field and long-term viability.

“Family child care homes are not being properly considered when it comes to benefits that help us maintain our businesses...I hope that this time, a fairer approach will be taken and that the requirements and documentation will be simpler and more accessible for home child care providers.”

— Ruben Mallma Medina, FCC provider

“One empty slot in family child care is not an inconvenience. It’s a financial emergency.”

— Kimberly Tucker, FCC provider

“I would like the aid, funds, and all existing resources to maintain and strengthen home-based child care businesses like mine to reach us directly without excessive paperwork or requirements.”

— Maria E. Gonzalez-Reyes, FCC provider

Theme 5: Equity and Restorative Justice

Advocacy organizations, providers, and parents highlighted that the Endowment presents an opportunity to advance equity in how public investments support families and the ECE workforce.

Primary equity considerations included:

- Ensuring that providers of color, women, and caregivers of children with disabilities are not forced out of the workforce due to systemic gaps.
- Expanding pathways to ownership and long-term economic stability, particularly for providers of color, so that the system creates opportunities for asset-building and intergenerational wealth.
- Prioritizing working-class and ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) families who may earn too much to qualify for existing assistance but still face significant financial barriers to accessing affordable child care.

Testimony stressed that equity must be operationalized through clear priorities, fair and understandable eligibility thresholds, and accountability mechanisms that center families and providers most affected by child care affordability challenges, access gaps, and system instability.

“For more than a century, CT’s early childhood system has rested on the labor of black women, especially family child care providers, who open their homes and care for entire neighborhoods long before our state recognized child care as essential infrastructure...The Endowment gives us the power to change that story.” — Georgia Goldburn, program leader

“Middle-income families, especially those just above the cutoff for Care 4 Kids, are being squeezed the hardest. We make ‘too much’ to qualify for help, but nowhere near enough to absorb fees that exceed college tuition.” — Cora D’Alessandro, parent and faculty member at UConn Waterbury

Theme 6: Program Sustainability and True Cost of Care

Testimony consistently emphasized that the long-term sustainability of the early childhood education system depends on funding that reflects the true cost of delivering high-quality care.

Key points included:

- Programs cannot absorb rising costs for wages, benefits, insurance, rent or mortgage payments, utilities, food, and supplies without adequate reimbursement.
- Facility investments are critical, particularly for small centers and FCC providers who often lack access to capital, financing, or ownership of their physical space.

- Without predictable funding, programs cannot plan for staff retention or long-term viability.

Speakers encouraged the Advisory Board to balance expansion with rate adequacy, capital support, and long-term financial planning, emphasizing the importance of sustainability as the system grows. They also recommended contingency plans to protect the Endowment during economic downturns.

“The fixed costs are a burden on these small businesses that already operate on a thin margin. Because of the economic squeeze, there is little room for building improvements and capital projects.”
— Rep. Robin Comey

“High quality for young children requires more money...We need to know what income will be available to work with, and what will not, way before 7/1/2027.” — Joyce Abate, center-based provider

“Increased stable funding lets programs plan long-term improvements necessary to run quality programs. Programs will no longer have to survive by the skin of their teeth year after year.”

— Edie Reichard, center director

Theme 7: Impact on Families and the Economy

Parents' testimony illustrated how access to affordable, reliable child care directly influences economic mobility, particularly for mothers, single parents, and caregivers of children with disabilities. Speakers shared that child care decisions are often constrained not by preference, but by affordability, availability, and scheduling realities.

Recurring points:

- Families may delay or leave employment because child care costs exceed earnings.
- Limited availability of infant and toddler care — particularly full-day, full-year options — creates significant barriers for parents, especially those with nontraditional work schedules.
- Child care instability disrupts career trajectories, lifetime earnings, and state tax revenues.

Speakers framed investment in early childhood education as an important contributor to workforce participation and economic outcomes, benefiting families, employers, and the state's economy.

“When parents, especially mothers, step out of the workforce, the state loses tax revenue, employers lose skilled workers, and entire industries lose experienced talent.” — Sarah Russell, parent

“As the Endowment grows, it will continue to expand access and ease financial burdens, allowing parents to work, pursue education, and care for their children without making difficult sacrifices.”

— Chenae Russell on behalf of the CT Office of Early Childhood Parent Cabinet

Theme 8: Data, Accountability, and Cross-Sector Alignment

Testimony emphasized accountability, transparency, and the use of data to inform implementation.

Recommendations included:

- Creating a one point of entry portal to make it easier for families to navigate Early Start CT, Care 4 Kids, and related supports, and to collect additional data on family demand and unmet need.
- Using data to inform slot allocation and expansion decisions, including consideration of child care deserts, Care 4 Kids enrollment management, and family work-hour needs.

- Setting clear short-, medium-, and long-term targets for the Endowment's size and committing to sustained annual investments.
- Public reporting on progress, including access, affordability, provider and workforce stability, and parent experience.
- Maintaining meaningful parent and provider feedback loops, including mechanisms to gather input during implementation and course correction.

Speakers stressed that maintaining public trust will require clear benchmarks, regular reporting, and accountability to families and providers, while also ensuring that data is used to support cross-sector alignment and a comprehensive approach to supporting young children and their families.

"Transparent reporting and data-driven evaluation will show that Connecticut is keeping its promise, year after year." — The Connecticut Project Action Fund

"[The] data strongly suggests we need a cross-sector, aligned focus on young children's health and development as well as the health, mental health, and basic needs of the families in which they live and grow. Of course, early care and education is a core part of this kind of young child policy framework, but it is not the only part." — Dr. Janice Gruendel, CT 359 Network
