EEC December Board Meeting Public Comment

Name/Organization	Topic/Comment
Edna Cabral, FCC Provider	**Family Child Care Concerns:** I am writing to you on behalf of Family Child Care (FCC) providers across Massachusetts, who are a vital cornerstone of the Commonwealth's early education and workforce infrastructure. As you consider the agenda item *"Child Care Financial Assistance FY25 Reimbursement Rate Increase – Overview & Options for Consideration,"* I hope to bring attention to some of the challenges FCC providers face and humbly offer potential areas for support and collaboration that could help strengthen the child care system. First, I would like to express my gratitude to the *Strategies for Children* organization for hosting the recent 9:30 call, where key survey data was shared, and to the EEC team for dedicating time in a separate meeting to hear our concerns. Your engagement and willingness to listen are deeply appreciated, and I value the work being done to address the complexities of early education in Massachusetts. Family Child Care programs play a unique and essential role in Massachusetts communities, offering accessible, high-quality care in home-based settings. However, recent survey data highlights ongoing challenges that, if unaddressed, may jeopardize the stability of FCC programs statewide: • **55% of providers currently have openings** and are operating below capacity. • **More than 80% have openings for children two years and older**, creating financial strain for providers. • In the 30 communities offering UPK programs, FCCs were **not included** in the mixed-delivery model discussions, which could have been an opportunity to collaborate and expand capacity. Furthermore, disparities in reimbursement rates create additional pressure. While center-based programs received increases of up to 30%, FCCs

	saw more modest increases between 5% and 15%. With rising operational costs, this imbalance makes it increasingly difficult for many FCC providers to sustain their programs. Alarmingly, 50% of FCC providers surveyed reported they may close within the next five years, particularly as resources like the C3 grant diminish. Another key concern is the reduction of food tier rates following COVID-19. During the pandemic, the increased food reimbursements helped providers manage rising food costs while continuing to offer nutritious meals to children in their care. Unfortunately, the recent reduction in rates has occurred at a time when food prices remain high, placing an additional financial burden on FCC programs. Maintaining the elevated food tier rates would provide necessary relief and support. With these challenges in mind, I offer the following ideas for consideration as collaborative steps forward to sustain and strengthen FCC programs: 1. Equitable Reimbursement Rates: Continuing to explore ways to increase FCC voucher reimbursement rates, ensuring they reflect the true cost of delivering high-quality care in home-based settings. 2. Inclusion in Mixed Delivery Systems: Engaging FCC providers as active partners in UPK and other early education initiatives to better utilize FCC capacity and meet the diverse needs of families. 3. Support for Financial Sustainability: Developing programs or networks that could allow FCCs to access group opportunities, such as: a. Affordable health insurance options b. Retirement planning resources and tools for opening IRAs c. Bulk purchasing programs for essential supplies to reduce operational costs.

	4. **Restoration of Food Tier Rates:** Revisiting the elevated pandemic-era food reimbursement rates to help FCCs continue to provide healthy, high-quality meals amidst ongoing inflation. 5. **Recognition of Informal Scholarships:** Exploring ways to recognize and provide incentives for FCC providers who offer flexible, informal financial support to families who narrowly miss subsidy eligibility. This could include grant opportunities or additional financial recognition. Family Child Care providers wear many hats: educators, mentors, and critical support systems for families. They offer far more than child care alone—they provide emotional, educational, and often financial support to families navigating complex challenges. FCCs build lasting relationships, serving as trusted partners for families for years at a time. This personal, community-based approach is invaluable and irreplaceable. I acknowledge the tremendous work already being done by the Department of Early Education and Care and appreciate the Board's ongoing commitment to improving the early education system for all providers and families in Massachusetts. I share these thoughts not as criticisms but as opportunities for continued partnership and improvement that would ensure the sustainability of FCC programs. Thank you for your time, attention, and leadership. I look forward to ongoing collaboration and to supporting the essential role of Family Child Care providers in Massachusetts. Sincerely, Edna Cabral
Arthur Theophilopoulos, Young World Academy	**Universal Pre-K and Staffing:** Thank you for the opportunity to discuss and participate in the EEC Board Meeting. As a Center Based Provider in Region 3, Young World Academy has been

	successfully serving our local community since 1974 and has received numerous awards in doing so. In the past year, it is my understanding that local cities and towns have been implementing their own preschool through pre-k programs with federal and state grant funding. Salem is no exception and has plans of expanding this category substantially. This, as you can imagine, has caused a great concern among all centers. The issue is not capacity, we all have capacity for more children, but the issue is with hiring "capable" staff to ramp up our numbers to pre-Covid levels. This past September, the City of Salem and other municipalities took many of our students from enrolling into our Pre-K class and caused a great hardship to the center. The feeling is that there is a great unfairness in how this is being handled and rolled out. As of this September, Salem will offer programs for all of preschool, 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds. These programs are offering "free" education, while some are also pairing children with groups of special needs children. "FREE" will harm the entire industry statewide. Not to mention, that municipalities do not have to abide by EEC Regulations or Expectations. Moreover, the same cities and towns are also competing, unfairly, for the same quality staff. Therefore, we feel that further discussion should be had on this subject. All centers have endured much in the past four years during COVID, and we strongly feel that cities should be partnering with us and not competing with us. If there are issues that have prompted these actions, I would gladly sit on a panel to help resolve them without the detriment of harming the industry. Any further dilution of the preschool business may cause a collapse of the industry. We all rely on the preschool revenue, especially in this district. Infants and Toddlers, in this region or in our area, are a lost leader. Another words profits are very tight. We offer this program to fill our preschool, as do others. We cannot afford to be filling the public schools with our children, this is crazy. It takes great effort and work to enroll, nurture and grow our students for Preschool, and you can imagine

	how unfair this is to us. Additionally, not many centers can operate without both programs running simultaneously. To kill one or the other will be difficult for if not devastating to the industry. Please advise on courses of action that will mitigate this issue. The grant funds being issued to the cities and towns will not last forever, therefore the taxpayers will foot the bill. This also makes no economic sense! We are a Center based provider, and we do a great job at developing children. I won't speak for home daycare centers or other providers, but we would like to work with EEC and with our local communities and not compete with them. Please take this matter seriously, and please feel free to reach out to us at any time. I can be reached at the number's below for further discussion. Thank you for your understanding!

December 17, 2024

Good Afternoon Secretary Tutwiler, Commissioner Kershaw, Chair Belsito and EEC Board Members,

My name is Gillian Budine, today I am here to share a bit about the Coordinated Family and Community Engagement (CFCE) grant programs, funded by the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) and operating throughout all the communities of the Commonwealth.

I would like to request the Board members and Commissioner Kershaw, to join me and my fellow CFCE Program Coordinators in a continued conversation about the vital role that CFCE grant-funded programs play in supporting young children and their families in our state. These programs provide essential services that address the developmental, social, emotional, and community support needs of young children and their families, fostering healthy development, reducing caregiver isolation, and promoting early learning success. CFCE programs are a critical support system for families in our rural, suburban and urban communities.

With limited access to early care and education programs, many families with infants and toddlers rely on CFCE programs for enrichment, socialization, and opportunities to alleviate isolation through trusted relationships with CFCE staff. CFCE programs act as a local network of support, offering guidance, assistance in accessing care when available, and facilitating warm handoffs to additional supports. We also partner with EEC in engaging families, connecting them to resources, and supporting their transition to early education and school.

In our efforts to sustain and strengthen our capacity to serve families, it has become evident that additional financial support for CFCE programs is urgently needed. The CFCE grant has been reduced or level-funded **for over ten years**. We hope to discuss a plan for increasing financial support to ensure that this essential network remains resilient and robust, benefiting our families, communities.

Through a shared communication CFCE Coordinators across the Commonwealth report that a conservative 10% increase of funds would begin to address the following priority needs in CFCE programs.

- Coordinators report that the **CFCE Workforce priorities** are to support cost of living or pay increases for staff to <u>retain</u> staff.
- Coordinators report that **Program Stability priorities** are to hire additional qualified staff to be able meet the needs of families. Currently staff are extremely stretched with reduced hours with the need to meet increased responsibilities with fewer staff. Other priorities are to replace educational and consumable materials in playgroups where there is little or no budget to meet these needs.
- Coordinators report **Family Access priorities** are to hire bilingual staff, continue to staff family engagement and outreach events, and maintain or increase the playgroup sessions to meet the needs of families.

CFCE programs are the local and trusted web of support, warm handoffs, builders of relationships and partners that can support EEC with family engagement and meeting the goals of EEC's strategic plan. CFCE's can help EEC meet their goals of family engagement and support.

Sincerely,



Gillian Budine
Community Network for Children/ CFCE Program
New Salem Wendell RSD
201 Wendell Road
New Salem, MA 01355
cnccoord@erving.com

Comments shared by participating families:

I moved to Franklin County from out of state with a brand new baby. The isolation I felt was compounded by the rural setting with which I had no experience, and the lack of a family support network. CNC (CFCE Program) provided someone to email and check in, a baby welcome basket, and access to programming for my young children as they grew. Without CNC I would have certainly struggled with isolation and depression, and my children would not have had the advantages of powerful programming and playgroups-- things that children living in more urban settings have easy and frequent access to but which is all but denied to rural communities. - Parent from Shutesbury

The Community Network for Children's (CFCE Program)"Tales & Tunes" inspires and nourishes my daughter's creativity & love for books and music. This weekly offering has provided me with respite and community. I am so grateful for the books, songs, instruments, dances and crafts we are introduced to and the friendships that have formed. Living in Leverett can be isolating and sometimes just getting out of the house with 2 children under the age of 2 feels insurmountable, knowing there is a warm welcoming program a mile down the road that provides such fulfillment for families makes all the difference! -Parent from Leverett

I have personally found CNC (CFCE program) playgroups and events to be an Invaluable resource for getting out with small children and helping parents navigate the early years which can be so difficult. If I didn't have a little one at my feet I could expand on just how helpful! Here is just one example:
Having a positive place with structure where I can take my young children, playgroup(the only place locally where I can do that) greatly reduces the stress load at home. Often during stressful times I refer back to the playgroup and use that as a guide of positive behavior in a challenging time regarding their behavior. The kids know what is expected of them at playgroup and I ask them if this or that behavior would be ok there. And then they recognize their own behaviors and modify them accordingly. So the stress load at home becomes reduced thanks to our time at playgroup.

There are so many social and developmental benefits to the programs. THANKYOU so much . Being a parent is challenging and cnc makes it easier in so many ways. - Parent from New Salem

To the Board of the Department of Early Education and Care,

My name is Chris Cole, I am the Coordinated Family and Community Engagement Supervisor for Community Teamwork. I am incredibly grateful to be an employee of Community Teamwork and work so closely with the Department of Early Education and Care. The CFCE program here at Community Teamwork has made a tremendous impact on the lives of children across the six communities in our service area. One of our main priorities is to support the families in the area who cannot access formal early education. We provide this support with weekly community playgroups, where we use evidence-based curricula for caregivers of all kinds to participate in their child's development. Without having CTI as a lead agency, I don't know how it could be possible to do the work we are currently doing.

The Coordinated Family and Community Engagement program is an amazing success, but without additional funding to support programing statewide, it will stagnate in the face of rising costs. If the Department of Early Education and Care were to increase its investment, it could directly benefit the impact of Early Literacy and Kindergarten Readiness campaigns statewide. During such a crucial moment where the Commonwealth has determined Early Literacy and Kindergarten Readiness as areas of tremendous need, the Coordinated Family and Community Engagement program is well positioned to tackle this head on.

I look forward to hearing my testimony and others present at today's EEC Board meeting. While the EEC Board is meeting today, I will be working with local parents and caregivers in a workshop about Child Sleep and Routines.

Thank you for your time and attention,

Chris Cole
CFCE Supervisor
Community Teamwork Incorporated
77 Parker Avenue, Dracut MA
(978) 418-9306

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