



## We need the Office of Early Childhood

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Connecticut has long focused on decreasing the achievement gap in K-12 settings. However, families, child care providers and early childhood advocates know too well that such initiatives are insufficient without a comprehensive, streamlined early childhood system.

And yet, despite strong bipartisan support, Connecticut's General Assembly failed to vote on a bill that would have created an Office of Early Childhood. The legislation -- HB 6359 -- would have coordinated and improved early childhood services that are currently fragmented, supporting parents and caregivers, and ultimately providing children with a strong foundation for life success. At a moment when citizens across the state are calling for educational equity and equal opportunity for children in K-12 education, we call on our legislators to take this crucial first step in preparing children for school success.

Take Finland, for example, whose students placed first on the latest global ranking of student academic performance. Educators from all over the world, including the United States, are clamoring to figure out Finland's formula for educational success. "It's their early childhood education system," our friend Eeva recently told us. "No one's talking about it, but it's the 'secret' everyone's looking for."

Intrinsic to Connecticut's alarming achievement gap -- one of the largest in the country -- is an opportunity gap that begins at birth. From our intensive work supporting family child care providers and families across Connecticut, at All Our Kin we see daily how this opportunity gap manifests. Parents don't have safe, educational places to bring their children while they work; the early childhood workforce is underpaid, under-resourced and disrespected.

The opportunity gap will only widen as children continue to be denied the nurturing relationships and quality environments early in life that are crucial for later success. For more than a decade, All Our Kin has worked toward addressing these systemic challenges, working to shift a culture that too often thinks student success happens in a vacuum with K-12 teachers and administrators, and is only just starting to understand the fundamental impact of early childhood experiences.

We shouldn't have been surprised, then, when Eeva told us that coupled with a successful Finnish education system is a Finnish early care and education (ECE) system that supports parents and caregivers in promoting children's healthy emotional, cognitive, and physical development.

Eeva, who grew up in Finland but now works and is raising her two daughters in the United States, sees stark differences between the way early childhood education is treated in the United States and in Finland. "In Finland," she explains, "child care is seen as a place children should be, a place that benefits them. It's not like in the United States, where there's an attitude that child care is depriving children of time better spent with mom." The difference in

attitudes toward child care between the two countries is understandable given that high-quality, universally accessible child care is a reality in Finland, but not in the U.S.

Finnish law grants all children under age 7 “a subjective right to child care.” From birth, each child is entitled to a space in an early childhood environment of the parent’s choice, be it in a public child care center, or a private program such as a family child care. It’s important to note that in Finland, parent choice is real, not rhetoric: Municipalities bear the majority of the cost of care, and income-based, sliding-scale parent fees are capped at less than 40 percent of the typical cost of center-based preschool in the U.S.

Along with availability, affordability and choice, Finland’s ECE system includes the key component for future student success: quality. Finnish ECE doesn’t emphasize testing or, in Eeva’s words, “building the greatest brain.” Instead, programs are play-based, informed by best practices in ECE education and led by highly qualified, highly respected teachers.

And in the United States?

“I had no clue how to find child care [in the United States],” says Eeva. “I asked my employer for help, it was no use. I placed an ad in the paper for a nanny, but the person was not professional or reliable,” she remembers. “Then, I found a safe, affordable family child care program, but the TV was often on. I finally enrolled my children at an amazing center, where they engage students in their own education and encourage exploration and dramatic play. It was almost as good as the standard program in Finland,” she laughs. “I wish every child could go to a place like that, but here, it costs so much.”

Eeva’s story is not unlike the stories of countless parents in the United States faced with navigating a fragmented and insufficient early childhood system. However Eeva and her family were fortunate to have the community network and financial resources that, in the end, gave her children the early experiences that prepared them for kindergarten and far beyond.

For low-income families, this is often not the case. That is why All Our Kin invests in home-based family child care settings like the one that Eeva found affordable, but not high-quality. By supporting family child care providers with coaching and consultation, training and technical assistance, we are able to increase the supply of high-quality, affordable early care options.

Our work is driven by a fierce commitment to educational equity and ensuring that all children, regardless of where they live, their racial or ethnic background, or how much money their parents earn, will begin their lives with all the advantages, tools, and experiences that we, as a society, are capable of giving them.

As Connecticut continues to grapple with educational inequity, and as Finland receives continued attention for their students’ high achievement, it is vital to understand that Finnish students are achieving in the context of a country that has universal, high-quality early childhood education.

To truly move the needle on student success, Connecticut must abandon siloed efforts of investment solely in K-12 education. Learn from Finland: Early childhood education is an integral part of a child’s educational trajectory. We need a comprehensive, family-friendly system that ensures all children receive quality early childhood experiences.

We urge our legislators and state leadership to come together in a special legislative session and create the Office of Early Childhood that we so desperately need.