

Special Act 14-22
December 30, 2014

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) in consultation with the Office of Early Childhood (OEC), is submitting this report in fulfillment of Special Act 14-22, An Act Concerning Access to Preschool Programs for Children in the Care and Custody of The Department of Children and Families. The report will provide data and analysis of key indicators as well as policy and practice updates designed to maximize the enrollment of eligible preschool-aged children in eligible preschool programs. This submission also includes three attachments; program definitions and DCF's policy and practice guide, which will be posted forthwith.

This special act requires DCF to report by January 1, 2015, to the joint standing committees of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children, human services, education and appropriations concerning: (1) the number of eligible preschool-aged children, as defined in section 1 of this act, who are enrolled in an eligible preschool program, as defined in section 1 of this act, at the time that such children are placed in out-of-home care by the Commissioner of Children and Families pursuant to an order of commitment under section 46b-129 of the general statutes; (2) the number of eligible preschool-aged children who are not enrolled in an eligible preschool program at the time of such placement; (3) the number of children age birth to three, inclusive, who are placed in out-of-home care by the Commissioner of Children and Families pursuant to an order of commitment under section 46b-129 of the general statutes; (4) the number of eligible preschool-aged children who require special education and related services and the number and percentage of such children who enrolled in a preschool program; (5) an analysis of the availability of spaces in eligible preschool programs in relation to the geographic placement of eligible preschool-aged children described in subdivision (2) of this subsection; (6) an analysis of the availability of spaces in eligible preschool programs in relation to the nature of such eligible preschool program and the cost of such eligible preschool program to the Department of Children and Families; (7) an analysis of eligible preschool programs and transportation options that will minimize costs to the department, including eligible preschool programs that provide transportation or whose geographic proximity to a child's placement is such that the provision of transportation by a foster parent or caregiver is considered within the reasonable expectations of the duties of such foster parent or caregiver, and (8) a plan to provide priority access to eligible preschool-aged children described in subdivision (2) of this subsection at state and federally-funded preschool programs.

Preschool-aged children, per the legislation, is defined as any child age three to five inclusive, who is placed in out-of-home care by the Commissioner of Children and Families pursuant to an order of commitment under section 46b-129 of the general statutes.

Below outlines the eligible preschool programs and current program capacity for the population at large.

(A) School Readiness program, as defined in section 10-16p of the general statutes

In SFY 2015, School Readiness is providing quality early care and education opportunities for over 12,000 preschool-aged children in 68 communities across the state. In 2014-15 School Readiness allotted 7,762 Full-Day (10 hours)/Full-Year spaces; 1,775 School-Day (6 hours)/School-Year spaces; 2,246 Part-Day (2.5 hours)/Part-Year spaces, and 490 Extended-Day spaces.

(B) Preschool program offered by a local or regional board of education or regional educational service center

In School Year 2013-14, preschool was provided to 16,382 preschool-age children in public school settings, in 160 school districts. (Some of these preschool spaces are duplicative of spaces shown in School Readiness and Head Start programs if those sites are in a public school.) Approximately 4,450 3- and 4-year-olds each year receive special education services.

(C) Preschool program accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children

In 2014, there were 471 NAEYC Accredited Programs, with capacity for 14,527 preschool children and additional 17,611 children ages birth to school age. These programs are inclusive of the NAEYC accredited School Readiness, local or regional board of education or regional educational service centers, state-funded Child Day Care Centers, and Head Start Programs.

(D) Head Start program

In 2014, the federal-funded Head Start program had enrollment equal to 5,700 children ages 3 to 5 years. In addition, state-funding for Head Start grantees provided services to 1,280 children ages 3 to 5 years.

(E) Any preschool program that the Commissioner deems suitable to meet the needs of the child

In addition to the preschool programs noted above, the Office of Early Childhood also provides funding for 2,573 preschool spaces, though Child Day Care Center (CDC) contracts in 52 communities. The CDC programs are NAEYC accredited. Moving forward under a new Federal Preschool Development Expansion Grant, an additional 428 preschool spaces will be available in the fall of 2015 for 4-year-old children in households below 200 percent of the federal poverty line. The programs must meet high-quality requirements mandated under this grant. In

addition, Smart Start preschool spaces in public schools for 3- and 4-year-olds will be available in the fall of 2015 with the requirement that these be NAEYC accredited or secure NAEYC accreditation. The Smart Start program requires that at least 60 percent children enrolled must be in households that are below 75% of the state median income, or 50% of children are eligible for free or reduced price lunches.

The DCF Commissioner may determine that a high-quality licensed family child care program may be more suitable for some children. This would be determined on a case-by-case basis.

The following is in response to the specific questions included in the legislation:

1. The number of eligible preschool aged children, as defined in section 1 of this act, at the time that such children are placed in out of home care by the Commissioner of Children and Families pursuant to an order of commitment under section 46b-129 of the general statutes.

In SFY 14, there were 249 children (ages 3-5) that met the criteria as eligible preschool-aged children

Of those, the LINK data shows 145 (58.2%) were in some form of educational setting at the time of their entry into DCF care. Sixty-six (66) of them were already in either Kindergarten or 1st Grade, with another 79 in Head Start or some other type of preschool program.

GRADE	# Entries	% Entries
Head Start	26	10.4%
Pre-K	53	21.3%
Kindergarten	54	21.7%
1st grade	12	4.8%
NO DATA	104	41.7%
Grand Total	249	100.0%

2. The number of eligible preschool-aged children who are not enrolled in an eligible preschool program at the time of such placement.

There is missing data regarding one hundred and four (104) eligible children. In these cases, certain data fields were not completed or had data entry errors. Based on a sampling of

cases gathered through narrative entries and treatment plans enrollment was noted indicating the number is smaller than 104 but the degree to which its smaller is unknown absent a case review of each case. As such the Department will conduct a case review to both reconcile the data and facilitate enrollment in those cases where it has not occurred. It is expected that through the new data sharing agreement with SDE and the development of a new case management system, continued improvements in data will occur.

3. The number of children age birth to three, inclusive, who are placed in out-of-home care by the Commissioner of Children and Families pursuant to an order of commitment under section 46b-129 of the general statutes.

730 children in this age range entered into DCF care as specified above during SFY14.

4. The number of eligible preschool-aged children who require special education and related services and the number of percentage of such children who enrolled in a preschool program

In SFY14 based on LINK data 29 (11.6%) of the 249 3 – 5 year-olds that entered DCF care are currently documented as either being eligible for Special Education or have a 504 Plan in place.

GRADE	# Entries	% Entries	Sp.Ed. Eligible or 504 Plan
Head Start	26	10.4%	5
Pre-K	53	21.3%	9
Kindergarten	54	21.7%	10
1st grade	12	4.8%	0
NO DATA	104	41.7%	5
Grand Total	249	100.0%	29

5. An analysis of the availability of spaces in eligible preschool programs in relation to the geographic placement of eligible preschool-aged children described in subdivision (2) of this subsection.

For the 145 children for which there were complete data elements, 44% were enrolled in programs within the town in which they were placed. However, absent a detailed case

review, the data doesn't reveal if lack of placement can be attributed to capacity. There are multiple reasons why alternate towns may have been chosen including:

- continued enrollment in a child's current program to support continuity of relationships, minimizing disrupted relationships
 - enrollment in closer proximity to the child's birth parents home to support reunification
 - enrollment in a town where the substitute caregiver works.
6. An analysis of the availability of spaces in eligible preschool programs in relation to the nature of such eligible preschool program and the cost of such eligible preschool program to the Department of Children and Families

In SFY 14, more than \$234,000 in childcare payments were made to preschool programs for the 249 children identified in this cohort. This does not include funds spent for before and after school programming for those programs with shorter operating hours. An additional challenge is the lack of a specific payment code for preschool programs, making it difficult to discern between childcare and preschool. As such the Department is establishing a specific preschool payment code.

7. An analysis of eligible preschool programs and transportation options that will minimize costs to the department including eligible preschool program that provide transportation or whose geographic proximity to a child's placement is such that the provision of transportation by a foster parent or caregiver is considered within the reasonable expectations of the duties of such foster parent or caregiver.

There are a few public schools that provide school readiness transportation and approximately 8 Head Start programs that provide transportation. Seven communities receiving the new Federal Preschool Development Expansion grant have included transportation in their budgets.

A review of transportation costs indicates that on average the cost to transport one child roundtrip daily is \$150. A more definitive answer on need will be established when the case review noted above is complete. There is value in having the child enrolled in a program closest to where they reside yet based on specific circumstances may not be in the best interest, such as: child is already enrolled in a program and a move would create additional fractured relationships for the child or given the goal and timing associated with reunification, enrollment in a program in closer proximity to the birth parent(s) may be a better option.

8. A plan to provide priority access to eligible preschool aged children described in subdivision (2) of this subsection at state and federally –funded preschool programs.
- DCF has developed policy and an accompanying practice guide to further promote and maximize enrollment in eligible preschool programs (see attached).
 - The Department has clearly defined the target population as outlined in both the policy and practice guide with an emphasis on the fact that the school year affords the opportunity for enrollment to begin when a child is 2.9 years old by the beginning of the academic school year. (I.e. 2 year old child with a birth date of 10/31 should be enrolled in a program). See draft policy and practice guidance attached.
 - A data development agenda is being established to support better and more sophisticated sharing among multiple sources including State Department of Education (SDE) and the Office of Early Childhood (OEC).
 - DCF is developing a new Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) system with improved capacity to track and monitor access and enrollment activities.
 - DCF is revising payment codes to create a specific code for preschool programming to allow for clear distinctions between childcare and eligible preschool programs.
 - OEC and DCF will explore an opportunity to launch a pilot program in communities with disproportionately high numbers of preschool-aged children in foster care that will reserve state-funded slots for those children. This pilot program requires collaboration between DCF, OEC and state-funded preschool providers to identify and recruit children to enroll in high-quality programs equipped to serve our most vulnerable children. The two agencies are committed to working with DCF caseworkers and local providers to ensure that children in foster care are not only prioritized for priority care, but that they actually receive the care.
 - A current legislative proposal submitted by the OEC seeks to remove the residency requirement from the school readiness statute to provide the local communities with greater flexibility to accept children from other towns.

Conclusion:

The Department of Children and Families has developed specific policy and practice changes to maximize the enrollment of children in preschool programs. Central to those efforts is DCF's partnership with the Office of Early Childhood. As noted in question eight, a series of activities

are underway to build on this progress and make system changes that will provide ongoing and improved data relative to service need, capacity, access, and utilization while also identifying challenges to allow for system revisions if needed.

ATTACHMENT 1

**DCF POLICY
ACCESS TO PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS**

Treatment

Early Childhood Education

45-XX

DCF Policy: Children's Access to Preschool Programs

Policy Per Special Act 14-22 An Act Concerning Access to Preschool Programs for Children in the Care and Custody of the Department of Children and Families(DCF), DCF shall maximize the enrollment of eligible preschool-aged children in eligible preschool programs.

Definitions "Preschool-aged child" means any child age three to five, inclusive, who is placed in out-of-home care by the Commissioner of Children and Families pursuant to an order of commitment under section 46b-129 of the general statutes and who is not enrolled in a preschool program or kindergarten at the time of such placement

"Eligible preschool program" means

- (A) a school readiness program, as defined in section 10-16p of the general statutes,
- (B) a preschool program offered by a local or regional board of education or regional educational service center,
- (C) a preschool program accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children,
- (D) a Head Start program, or
- (E) any preschool program that the commissioner deems suitable to meet the needs of the child.

DCF Regional Office Social workers shall help to maximize enrollment of each child in an age appropriate educational setting including; an eligible preschool program, unless the child is incapable of attending school full time due to a medical condition of the child, which incapability is supported by regularly updated information in the child's case plan.

See the Early Childhood Practice Guide

ATTACHMENT 2

**SPECIAL ACT 14-22
PRACTICE GUIDE**

Special Act 14-22 Practice Guide

Policy Statement:

Per Special Act 14-22 An Act Concerning Access to Preschool Programs for Children in the Care and Custody of the Department of Children and Families, The Department of Children and Families (DCF) shall adopt policies and procedures that maximize the enrollment of eligible preschool-aged children in eligible preschool programs.

Purpose:

Early childhood interventions optimize children's curiosity and readiness for school. Involvement for children in preschool programs has been found to offer important foundational learning experiences. Children who attend high-quality early learning programs are shown to perform better not only academically, but throughout their lifetimes as well.

Studies have shown the short- and long-term effects of quality early learning programs. Positive impacts from high-quality pre-school programs can last a lifetime and include:

- More likely to succeed academically
- Less likely to require special education or remediation
- Higher reading and math skills
- Increased high school graduation rates
- Higher rates of college attendance and completion
- Less likely to commit crimes

The policy and practice guide are designed to maximize the enrollment of children in eligible programs.

Eligible Programs:

Eligible preschool are defined as:

- (A) School readiness program, as defined in section 10-16p of the general statutes
- (B) Preschool program offered by a local or regional board of education or regional educational service center
- (C) Preschool program accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
- (D) Head Start program
- (E) Any preschool program that the commissioner deems suitable to meet the needs of the child.

Best practice is for children to be enrolled in a full time program. Based on the needs of the child, if a full time program is not appropriate, this information must be documented in a narrative entry and in the case plan.

Full time Programs are defined as a child attending a program 5 days per week, based on an academic school day and year, including summer programming.

If a full time program cannot be secured or is not appropriate a part- time program should be secured.

Part-time programs can include, but not limited to half days, multiple days per week.

Target Population:

Early education has demonstrated long term results for children's overall well being and academic achievement. During the Department's interactions with families it remains important to stress the importance of these early learning opportunities.

The target population is defined as preschool-aged children meaning any child age three to five who is placed in out of home care by the Commissioner of Children and Families pursuant to an order of commitment. The school year affords the opportunity for enrollment to begin when a child is 2.9 years old by the beginning of the academic school year. (i.e. 2 year old child with a birthdate of 10/31 should be enrolled in a program)

Note: Children in mental health or medical facilities should be enrolled in the educational setting that collaborates with those programs.

Identification and Enrollment Process:

The DCF Social Worker in collaboration with the FASU Support Social Worker and the substitute caregiver ie: Kin, CORE Foster Home or Therapeutic Foster home shall identify potential programs best able to meet the educational needs of the child and when appropriate and feasible enroll those children currently not in a program. In addition to assessing the child's specific needs, including the child's exposure to traumatic events and their stress reactions, there are also gaps in program offerings depending on where a family resides in the state. As such, identification, planning and enrollment must consider the overall needs of the child, the location of programming and travel impact on the child as well as the family's schedule. The most appropriate mode of transportation particularly for this very young group of children should be the foster family. As noted below there are several options that offer up varied educational opportunities and based on the needs of the child and family may offer a better fit.

For children under an Order of Temporary Custody, the DCF SW must secure the parent/guardian's permission to enroll the child in a program. The DCF SW should consult with AAG and/or Principal Attorney if any barriers to securing permission for enrollment arise.

In order to identify an eligible program in close proximity to the child's home, the DCF SW and substitute caregiver can access 211 for a list of programs. Below is a list of online resources to assist in program identification.

Program type	Website/Source
NAEYC program	http://families.naeyc.org/find-quality-child-care
Head Start Locator	http://ecklc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/HeadStartOffices
Office of Early childhood	https://www.elicense.ct.gov/Lookup/LicenseLookup.aspx
Info line 211	http://www.211childcare.org/
Local Boards of Education	Contact the local Board of Education offices.

Waitlist:

If the program in close proximity has a wait list, the DCF SW in conjunction with the caregiver shall explore alternative programs.

Payment:

The caregiver must apply to Care for Kids for funding. The DCF SW will work with the caregiver to ensure payment is secured and submitted timely. **Cross Reference Daycare for Foster Children Policy # 36-55-25.10.**

Documentation:

Every child in the care of the Department should have an educational icon created in LINK. The DCF Social Worker will create the child's educational icon in LINK and enter updates as needed. The educational icon must include:

- the name of the preschool/early childhood program
- town of nexus
- contact person
- phone number
- educational setting

NOTE: If the child is receiving Special Education Services, the Social Worker must include this information in the educational tab of the LINK record.

Responsible LEA tab:

The DCF Social Worker must include the town of Nexus status, town and LEA jurisdiction with the reason for change.

Education Site Tab:

The DCF Social Worker shall select one of the grade options listed in Link:

- Birth-Three
- Head Start
- Pre-K
- Kindergarten

Case Plan:

The DCF Social Worker shall include relevant educational information in the child's case plan including enrollment activities and decision points. **Cross reference Case Planning Practice Guide.**

The following are examples of information that can be included in the case plan:

- Medical or behavioral health needs of the child; including the child's attachment history of separation and loss, the child's coping responses and their exposure to other traumatic events
- Program not available in the community the child resides or where the foster parent works
- Explanation for why a child is participating in a part time versus full time program (i.e. child is located in area where only part-time slots are available)
- The child is special education eligible.
- The primary language of the child