

Early Connections Birth to Three Teachers & Therapists: **Meeting the Needs of Infants & Toddlers with Delays or Disabilities for Over 30 Years**

Background & History

The Department of Developmental Services' (DDS) "Early Connections" Birth to Three program the primary source of intervention and care for infants and toddlers with special needs in local communities across Connecticut. The program was established under the Unified School District #3 in 1978 as the first of its type in Connecticut, and has since served more than 40,000 children.

Due to the program's longevity and reputation, collaborative relationships have been well established within every city and town, school districts statewide and the pediatric medical community. Early Connections teachers and therapists have developed an extensive knowledge of statewide resources, community programs, and supports for families.

Mission & Objectives

The mission of Connecticut's Birth to Three system is to strengthen the capacity of families to meet the developmental and health-related needs of their infants and toddlers who have delays or disabilities. Early Connections teachers and therapists currently serve approximately 250 children out of 4,774 served through both public providers and private contractors statewide. The program presently has the capacity to serve more than 400 children and their families.

Early Connections includes 51 highly trained professional staff, including teachers with Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) credentials and special training in Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), sensory integration, and infant mental health.

The program sends teachers, occupational therapists, speech and physical therapists, and teachers of the blind and hearing impaired into the homes of children up to 36 months old. They conduct assessments and determine the appropriate treatment program and learning strategies for the child, and also offer connections to family support groups and counseling throughout the state.

Impact on Communities

Early Connections provides vital school readiness services for local K-12 districts around the state. By ensuring that children enter the classroom prepared to learn, the program's staff help to close the achievement gap and propel kids into an educational environment where they can thrive.

Without the services that Early Connections teachers and therapists provide, local school districts will bear a heavy financial burden when children who could not access quality early intervention are enrolled.

Better Budget Choices

Early Connections was slated for closure earlier this summer under Governor Dannel P. Malloy's alternative budget. Since then, state employees have ratified an agreement that saves \$1.6 billion for taxpayers over the next two years.

With the agreement passed and Early Connections staff no longer subject to layoffs, DDS notified parents with children currently in the program that it would not be closed. The next day, however, staff were notified that admissions to new families in need would be permanently closed.

In 2009, DDS stopped accepting referrals to Early Connections, and even closed new admissions for nearly six months. The move was so costly that the former commissioner testified to the legislature at the time that it contributed to dragging the department \$9 million deeper in deficit.

As far back as 2006, program administrators acknowledged the fiscal burden of shutting-down Early Connections. In a report to the department, they assessed a cost of between \$87,610.00 and \$116,813.00 to shift each teacher's caseload, based on serving between 12 and 16 children, to private contractors.

Putting Families First

With the increase in the service demand for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and other developmental delays, now is not the time to limit choices for their families. With an agreement to save taxpayers millions in the current and future fiscal years, now is not the time to waste resources shutting down effective and efficient services.

