

Connecticut's Historic Child Care Reform Offers a National Blueprint

By CT Cradle to Career Coalition, a StriveTogether Network Partnership

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For years, Connecticut families have faced impossible choices about childcare. Parents stretched their paychecks to cover costs that exceeded rent. Waitlists forced families to delay work or school. Educators who cared for children every day earned less than \$35,000 a year and often lacked health insurance. The system was broken and families paid the price.

This year, Connecticut charted a new course. Lawmakers passed one of the most ambitious childcare reform packages in the country. The centerpiece, Senate Bill 1, created a \$600 million endowment to sustain affordable childcare for decades. Families earning under \$100,000 now qualify for free care. Costs for others are capped at 7% of income. More than 16,000 new infant-to-pre-K slots will open. Educators will finally receive wage parity and health benefits. Additional bills funded \$80 million in facility and technology improvements, \$60 million in wage supplements and \$10 million annually for insurance subsidies. Together, these reforms make Connecticut a national leader in childcare and open new paths to economic mobility.

The timing could not be more urgent. Recent scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show [historic lows in reading and math for high school students](#), a clear signal that too many young people are being left behind. We know early learning sets students on the trajectory for the rest of their education and lives. These reforms are about giving every child a strong start and changing that trajectory. High-quality early learning builds the foundation for reading by third grade, confidence in middle school and readiness for postsecondary opportunities. It reduces the need for costly interventions later in a child's education and is one of the most effective strategies for closing opportunity gaps. According to the Council for a Strong America, expanding access to preschool across the country could realize a return on investment of \$90 billion over the lifetime of the children served, proof that these investments strengthen both children's futures and our economy.

And this is how change happens: through persistent, community-driven work. The [Child Care for CT](#) (CC4CT) – a broad alliance including policy and advocacy leaders, philanthropy, researchers, and direct service providers – alongside local partnerships like Bridgeport Prospers, Danbury Collective, Norwalk ACTS, Stamford Cradle to Career, and Waterbury Bridge to Success, mobilized parents, educators, and advocates statewide.

Families testified about paying a quarter of their income for care. Educators described working multiple jobs just to survive. Advocates organized rallies and CC4CT's annual *Morning Without Child Care* day of action, showing lawmakers in real time what happens when parents have no safe place for their children. Years of coalition-building, aligned strategy, and community voice laid the groundwork for this historic moment.

Momentum is growing well beyond Connecticut. [New Mexico recently announced universal free child care](#) — a milestone for the state and for the national movement to treat child care as

essential infrastructure. Through StriveTogether, Connecticut is part of a network of communities across the country working toward the same goal: putting more young people on the path to economic mobility. In Wisconsin, network members recently secured a \$380 million state budget investment to expand access, stabilize the child care workforce and strengthen literacy outcomes. These wins show that communities working together can spark statewide transformation.

Connecticut's progress is a blueprint for what is possible when communities, advocates and policymakers align. But passing laws is only the beginning. Implementation will determine whether these reforms deliver on their promise. Policymakers must ensure multilingual families can access the new system. Communities must address barriers like transportation that too often limit real access. Families must remain at the table, so policies reflect their lived realities.

Local coalitions are already preparing for this next stage. Community engagement leads are listening to parents and providers. Partnerships are gathering data to monitor progress and make sure resources reach those who need them most. The Office of Early Childhood is working with advocates to design rules and processes that are responsive and equitable.

Affordable, high-quality childcare allows parents to stay in the workforce, keeps businesses strong and gives children the foundation they need to thrive. This is an education issue, an economic issue, a workforce issue and a moral issue.

Connecticut has taken bold action. Families will breathe easier knowing care is within reach. Educators will stay in classrooms because they are valued. Communities will thrive because children are better prepared to succeed.

Now we must make it count. By centering opportunity, holding systems accountable and keeping families at the heart of decision-making, Connecticut can ensure these reforms deliver lasting change. If we succeed, we will improve lives here at home and we'll show the nation what's possible when childcare is treated as essential infrastructure and when we work together to change the trajectory for the next generation.