

Section 9. Early Childhood Education and Care

from

All in for a Thriving Connecticut

Opportunities to Support Upward Mobility for the State's Immigrant Families

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9 Early Childhood Education and Care

During early childhood, infants, toddlers, and preschool children undergo rapid physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth. More than 1 million neural connections are formed each second during the first years of life, and more than 90 percent of the brain’s architecture has developed before age 5, laying the groundwork for all future learning.²²⁰ Recognizing the critical nature of this period in a child’s development, many states have in recent decades been working to scale up their provision of high-quality early childhood programs as a cost-effective means to close gaps and help children prepare to succeed in kindergarten and beyond, with positive effects continuing into adulthood.

For immigrant-background children (those with at least one immigrant parent) and Dual Language Learners (DLLs) also known as Multilingual Learners (young children with at least one parent who speaks a language other than English at home), the early childhood years are especially significant. These children often face unique challenges and opportunities that shape their developmental trajectories and future education success. Access to high-quality early childhood programs that account for their specific strengths and needs can therefore be critically important in supporting these children’s early language development, school readiness, future academic success, and longer-term health and well-being.

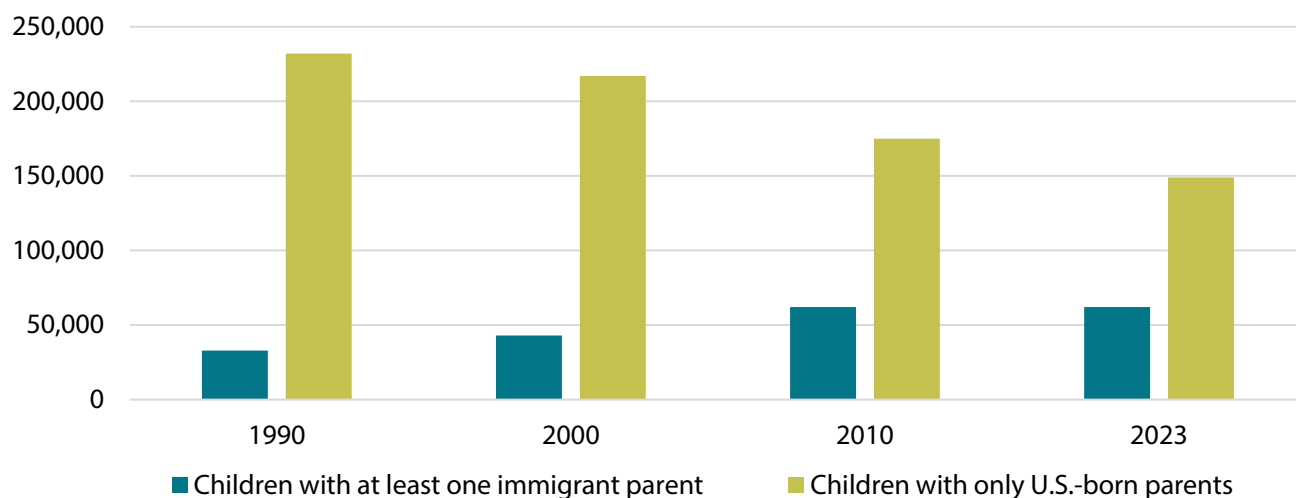
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A. Characteristics of Connecticut’s Young Child Population

In recent decades, the number of immigrant families with young children in Connecticut has increased significantly. In 1990, there were 33,000 children under age 6 who were part of immigrant families in the state, 91 percent of whom were born in the United States; they comprised 12 percent of the state’s young child population at that time. By 2023, their share of Connecticut’s young child population had grown to 29 percent, as the total number of young children from immigrant families living in the state almost doubled to 62,000, 90 percent of whom were born in the United States and thus have been U.S. citizens from birth (see Figure 2).

²²⁰ Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child, “Brain Architecture,” accessed July 15, 2025.

FIGURE 2

Number of Connecticut Children Ages 0 to 5, by Parental Immigration Status, 1990–2023

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 1990 and 2000 Decennial Census and the 2010 and 2023 American Community Survey (ACS).

Nationwide data show that immigrant households have more limited access to early childhood services in comparison to nonimmigrant households, despite making up a significant portion of populations that early childhood services aim to support.²²¹ Most early childhood programs and funding focus on supporting low-income households. For example, Head Start and Early Head Start determine income eligibility and prioritize enrollment for children from low-income families, using the U.S. Department of Health and

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Human Services' Poverty Guidelines as part of their criteria.²²² Similarly, home visiting services prioritize mothers and infants in households with incomes below 100 percent of the federal poverty level.²²³ In Connecticut, there were approximately 70,000 foreign-born parents with children ages 0 to 5 as of 2019–23, 12 percent of whose households were below the federal poverty level, and approximately 203,000 U.S.-born parents with children in the same age group, of whom 7 percent were below the poverty line.²²⁴

An important additional consideration for prioritization of families for early childhood services is the educational attainment of parents, as research shows a correlation between this and a child's school

221 Maki Park, Jacob Hofstetter, and Ivana Tù Nhi Giang, *Overlooked but Essential: Language Access in Early Childhood Programs* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2022).

222 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, "Poverty Guidelines and Determining Eligibility for Participation in Head Start Programs," updated February 13, 2025.

223 Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, *Connecticut Home Visiting System: Policy and Procedure Manual* (Hartford: Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, 2025).

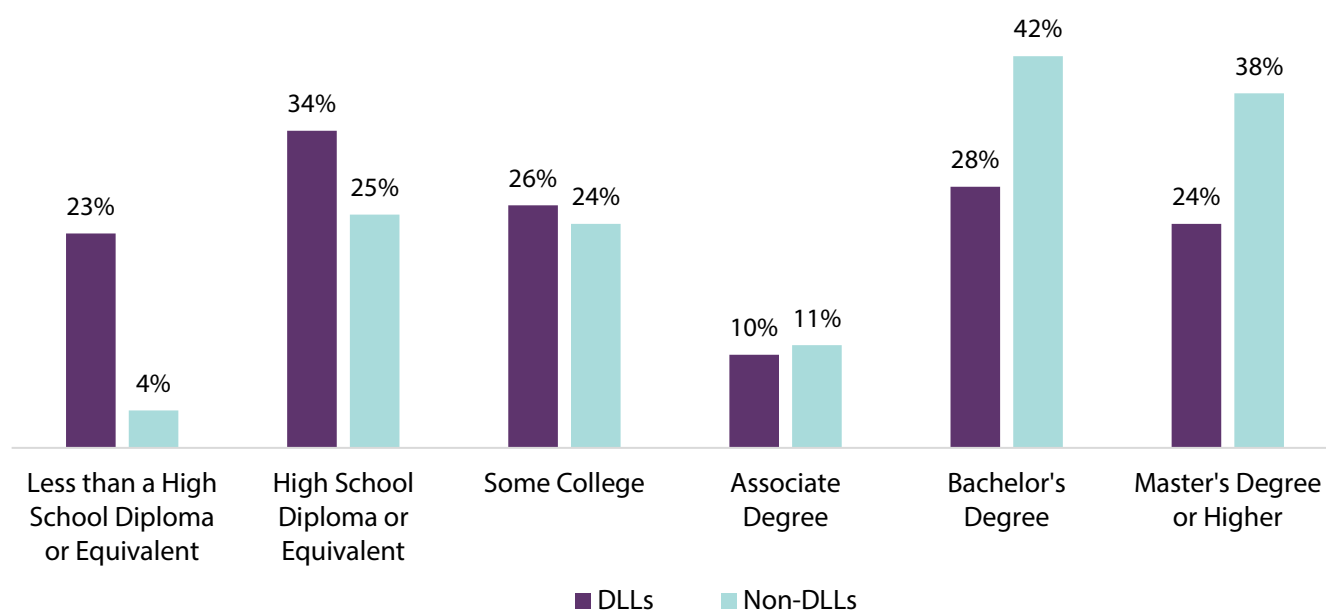
224 Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), pooled for 2019–23.

readiness and future academic success.²²⁵ This correlation holds particular importance for Connecticut policymakers and early childhood system leaders: While the 77,000 DLLs in Connecticut as of 2019–23 comprised 37 percent of the state’s children ages 0 to 5, they were 75 percent of all children in this age group with a parent whose highest level of education was less than a high school diploma or equivalent (see Figure 3). This significant disproportionality underscores the heightened value early childhood program participation holds for children from these families, as well as the potential benefits of connecting their parents to programs and learning opportunities that can lift their own education and economic trajectories and those of their children.

FIGURE 3

Parental Education Levels of Connecticut Children Ages 0 to 5, by DLL Status, 2019–23

Share of children with at least one parent whose highest level of formal education is...



Note: Percentages add to more than 100 percent because children with two parents who have different levels of education are represented twice in the graph.

Source: MPI analysis of pooled 2019–23 ACS data.

B. Early Childhood Services in Connecticut

The early childhood field is complex, encompassing services for different age groups (for example, infants, toddlers, and preschoolers) and services addressing various aspects of child development (including health, care, and early education). The public is often most familiar with early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, which largely serve 3- and 4-year-olds and seek to integrate preschool education and child care so

225 Robert Crosnoe, *Two-Generation Strategies and Involving Immigrant Parents in Children's Education* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2010); Thomas Gabe and Gene Falk, *Parents' Work and Family Economic Well-Being* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2006); U.S. General Accounting Office, *Early Childhood Programs: Parent Education and Income Best Predict Participation* (Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1994); Lynn A. Karoly and Gabriella C. Gonzalez, "Early Care and Education for Children in Immigrant Families," *The Future of Children* 21, no. 1 (2011): 71–101; National Research Council, *Hispanics and the Future of America* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2006); National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2017).

that young children of working parents can be enrolled in up to a full-day program, if needed. The diversity of services required for children across the 0–5 or 0–8 age span, along with the need for coordination across different sectors, makes the field of early childhood multifaceted and challenging to navigate. Additionally, how early childhood services are structured and delivered varies from state to state. In Connecticut, early childhood services—including state-funded ECEC, financial assistance grants, home visiting services (family-focused support delivered in the home), Birth to Three system services (early intervention for infants and toddlers with developmental delays or disabilities), child care licensing, and early childhood workforce development—are collectively overseen by the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood.

Given this diversity of services and the limited scope of the study, this section focuses on several key services that play particularly critical roles in supporting children and families during the early years: ECEC, home visiting, and Birth to Three services. Challenges affecting the equitable provision of quality early childhood services to the state’s immigrant-background and DLL children, as well as opportunities to address those challenges, were identified through interviews with individuals working in state systems and community programs as well as through analysis of program policies and service provision data.

Early Childhood Education and Care

ECEC services in Connecticut—as across the country—are provided through a mixed delivery system consisting of public, private, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations and include center-based programs, home-based care, family child care, and preschool programs. Programs have a wide range of costs, care arrangements, and educational approaches, all of which affect the availability and quality of services provided to families.

Supporting DLLs’ Language Development

Several decades of research show that quality ECEC services have the power to transform the lives of children, providing a strong foundation for lifelong learning, and to offer additional economic benefits by enabling parents of young children to participate in the workforce.²²⁶ Early childhood scholars, leaders, and practitioners widely agree that comprehensive, developmentally appropriate ECEC programs must support all domains of early learning and development—cognitive, socioemotional, physical, and linguistic. They also agree that language development is a primary driver, if not the key driver, of young children’s cognitive development and, as a result, brain architecture. Research shows that early language experiences stimulate neural connections, particularly in the brain’s language and cognitive centers, during a critical period of rapid synapse formation. These connections form the foundation upon which more complex learning and skills are built.²²⁷

With DLLs comprising 37 percent of Connecticut’s young children ages 0–5,²²⁸ the capacities of its ECEC and other early childhood services to effectively and equitably serve these children are central concerns.

²²⁶ Greg J. Duncan and Katherine Magnuson, “Investing in Preschool Programs,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27, no. 2 (2013): 109–132; Antje von Suchodoletz et al., “Early Childhood Education and Care Quality and Associations with Child Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis,” *PLOS One* 18, no. 10 (2023): e0293056; Executive Office of the U.S. President, *The Economics of Early Childhood Investments* (Washington, DC: Executive Office of the U.S. President, 2014).

²²⁷ Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child, “Brain Architecture.”

²²⁸ MPI analysis of pooled 2019–23 ACS data.

When these young DLLs enroll in English-speaking preschool, kindergarten, or other early childhood programs, their brains are using multiple language systems that are developing at different rates.²²⁹

Research shows that to effectively support their early learning trajectories, program designs must be responsive to their particular cognitive, socioemotional, and language development needs.²³⁰ In fact, DLLs benefit disproportionately

from participating in quality ECEC compared to non-DLLs, but only when the programs they participate in are of high quality and take their linguistic needs into consideration.²³¹

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Rooted in such research, language development, as a foundation for all learning, is emphasized in Connecticut's Early Learning and Development Standards (CT ELDS) DLL framework. The framework highlights the importance of considering a child's language development in all languages they are learning when tracking progress in other developmental areas.²³² The framework also acknowledges the proven advantages of learning multiple languages and promotes continuing support for children's home language development. While the CT ELDS DLL framework sets important expectations for language-responsive practices, its influence on program implementation depends largely on the extent to which programs receive guidance, oversight, and training aligned with its principles. To this end, the Office of Early Childhood has provided some professional development opportunities and resources, though there is not yet a consistent, statewide system ensuring that all providers are prepared to implement the framework's recommendations effectively.

In addition to supporting home language development during program hours, fostering positive communication with families is an essential aspect of supporting home language development overall. Immigrant families, particularly recent arrivals, recognize the power of English in the United States, and this may lead parents to question whether they should stop speaking their home language to avoid potentially delaying their child's English language development.²³³ Building positive relationships with parents of DLLs and providing them with encouragement and strategies to continue boosting their child's home language skills is important not only for supporting children's growing language skills and associated cognitive development, but also their cultural identity and self-esteem.²³⁴

229 Carol Scheffner Hammer et al., "The Language and Literacy Development of Young Dual Language Learners: A Critical Review," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2014): 715–33.

230 Linda M. Espinosa, *Early Education for Dual Language Learners: Promoting School Readiness and Early School Success* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2013).

231 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, *Systems Framework to Support Dual Language Learning in Early Care and Education Settings* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024).

232 Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, *Supporting All Children Using the Connecticut Early Learning and Development Standards: Dual Language Learners* (Hartford: Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, 2020); Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, *Connecticut Early Learning and Development Standards: What Children, Birth to Five, Should Know and Be Able to Do* (Hartford: Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, 2014).

233 Rica Ramírez, "To Speak or Not to Speak My Language: Supporting Families' Home Language Practices," *Teaching Young Children* 17, no. 1 (2023).

234 BUILD Initiative, *Supporting Multilingual Learners* (Boston: BUILD Initiative, 2023).

Because DLLs benefit most from ECEC programming tailored to their distinct brain development and learning needs, identifying a child’s linguistic background is a critical first step in supporting their language development in all languages they are learning. Numerous states, including Connecticut, utilize home language surveys to identify English Learners in K-12 schools and 4-year-olds enrolled in public preschool programs.²³⁵ While home language surveys and other methods and tools, such as teacher observations or family interviews, can be used across all ECEC programs to identify and support DLLs, Connecticut’s official home language survey protocols are limited to public school enrollment and associated preschool settings. ECEC programs outside of public school enrollment are not required to administer a standardized home language survey, meaning DLLs are not systemically identified in those settings. Without consistent DLL identification across all settings, system capacities for delivering tailored instructional strategies, home language support, and culturally responsive curriculum are compromised.

In addition, accurately identifying a child’s home language and their status as a DLL is essential to avoid misinterpreting the dual language acquisition process as a learning disability, which can lead to the over-identification of DLLs for early childhood special education. Given the many different forms ECEC can take, having a standardized approach would help ensure that all DLLs, regardless of the program in which they are enrolled, receive access to appropriate language development support.

Access to ECEC Programs in Connecticut

Connecticut’s ECEC system offers a range of programs and financial support for families. These include the Smart Start grant program, which funds the establishment or expansion of preschool programs in public schools; Early Start CT, which is a point-of-service contract between the Office of Early Childhood and contracted local child care programs or municipalities; and Care 4 Kids, a child care subsidy program for qualifying low to moderate income families to use at participating programs. A child or family’s immigration status is not a factor in determining their eligibility to receive state financial support for ECEC or to enroll in ECEC programs generally. This is true for the state’s newly developed Early Start CT, which combines preexisting programs including School Readiness Grants, State Head Start Supplement Grants, and Child Day Care Contracts into one new program that is fully funded by the state and does not mix with federal dollars.²³⁶ In contrast, the Care 4 Kids subsidy program is provided through a mix of federal and state funding and has different application requirements; this program has lower utilization among immigrant-background families, as the enrollment process requires detailed income verification and many immigrant parents, wary of the potential repercussions of providing such information to a government entity, have opted out of the program.²³⁷

More broadly, despite the many program options that exist, ECEC services are not available for many children, especially those from low-income families or facing systemic barriers such as residing in underfunded regions. For example, more than 45,000 Connecticut children are eligible for but not being served by formal child care services, and this gap is particularly pronounced in towns with higher

²³⁵ U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, “Tools and Resources for Identifying All English Learners,” in *English Learner Tool Kit* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

²³⁶ Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, “Early Start CT,” accessed August 6, 2025.

²³⁷ Daron Cyr et al., *State of Early Childhood: Equity of Access for Immigrant and Refugee Families* (New Haven: Connecticut Voices for Children, 2022).

Immigrant-dense cities such as Danbury, Norwalk, and Stamford are considered child care deserts, defined as places where there is at most only one licensed program slot available for every three children.

proportions of immigrant families.²³⁸ Immigrant-dense cities such as Danbury, Norwalk, and Stamford are considered child care deserts, defined as places where there is at most only one licensed program slot available for every three children.²³⁹ This means that many families meeting poverty or other eligibility criteria are still unable to access ECEC due to limited program capacity, funding constraints,

or logistical barriers. These structural limitations highlight the need for more coordinated and adequately resourced efforts to meet the early learning and care needs of all young children in the state, with particular attention to those disproportionately excluded from current systems of support.

The ECEC Workforce

Connecticut's ECEC programs are grappling with a shortage of early childhood educators, with low wages, long hours, and limited benefits (such as limited access to health insurance²⁴⁰) making it difficult to attract and retain qualified staff.²⁴¹ Additional challenges arise when programs aim to hire and retain culturally and linguistically diverse staff, despite their importance in serving immigrant families. These include English language proficiency requirements that can disqualify otherwise capable and experienced educators, unclear procedures around recognizing educational or professional qualifications earned in another country, a lack of bilingual reviewers for Child Development Associate certification, and lower compensation for assistant-level staff, who are often the most diverse group of ECEC practitioners.²⁴² Many programs in Connecticut face difficulties in hiring and retaining bilingual staff, especially those proficient in languages other than Spanish.²⁴³ The shortage of bilingual educators not only affects direct communication with families but also the cultural competence of services provided. The lack of such staff can lead to misunderstandings, reduced engagement, and potentially less effective services for immigrant and non-English-speaking families.

Informal family, friend, and neighbor care providers and licensed family child care providers are often the preferred choice among immigrant parents because they frequently share the language and cultural background of the families they serve, fostering trust and easier communication. In addition, these providers are often embedded within the same neighborhoods and communities as the families of children in their care and have more flexible hours than other ECEC services, making this a flexible and

238 Carla B. Abdo-Katsipis and Lauren K. Ruth, *State of Early Childhood: A Response to the Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care and a Continuation of Spotlighting Disenfranchised Populations* (New Haven: Connecticut Voices for Children, 2024).

239 Center for American Progress, "U.S. Child Care Deserts," accessed May 22, 2025.

240 For example, in 2023, 34.9 percent of child care workers in Connecticut relied on Medicaid coverage. See Georgetown University, McCourt School of Public Policy, Center for Children and Families; National Association for the Education of Young Children; and Center for Law and Social Policy, "Medicaid Is a Critical Support for the Early Childhood Education Workforce," updated April 2025.

241 Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, "Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care," accessed May 22, 2025; Abdo-Katsipis and Ruth, *State of Early Childhood*.

242 Cyr et al., *State of Early Childhood*; Alexis Fintland, Margie McHugh, and Maki Park, *Understanding Obstacles to Foreign Qualification Recognition for Key U.S. Early Childhood Education and Care Positions* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2024).

243 Cyr et al., *State of Early Childhood*.

accessible form of care.²⁴⁴ However, despite their important role, the number of family child care providers in Connecticut has been decreasing, limiting this essential resource for immigrant and other families.²⁴⁵

Several reasons have been cited for the decrease in licensed family child care providers, some of which may particularly affect immigrant providers. These include regulatory complexities, such as the need to comply with state regulations, zoning laws, and licensing requirements, which can be particularly challenging for those unfamiliar with U.S. systems. Financial constraints also play a role, such as a lack of capital to invest in upgrades or renovations necessary to meet licensing standards, or an inability to secure loans due to one's immigration status or lack of a U.S. credit history. Finally, because many of these providers care for children in their own homes, the nature of their housing can also be a limitation; many immigrant families rent their homes, and landlords may prohibit operating a business on the property.²⁴⁶

ECEC Goals and State Investment

In 2023, Connecticut initiated the Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care, a five-year strategic plan established by Governor Ned Lamont, with the goal of developing an equitable, high-quality, and sustainable ECEC system in the state.²⁴⁷ The strategic plan focuses on actionable, data-driven solutions that prioritize equitable access to early care and education, support for families and providers, and overall economic growth for Connecticut. A report by the panel that was submitted to the governor's office in 2023 included extensive feedback from workgroups, national and local experts, and stakeholders including providers, parents, businesses, and advocates. The panel's recommendations aim to address a variety of challenges in Connecticut's ECEC system, such as access, affordability, and quality to enhance family-friendliness, attract and retain more families, and ensure every child has a quality educational foundation to prepare them for future success.²⁴⁸ The report also emphasizes the importance of equitable access to ECEC for immigrant and refugee children, and outlines strategies to create a high-quality, sustainable, and inclusive child care system that addresses the diverse needs of state residents.

The Blue Ribbon Panel's report outlined a five-year plan to strengthen Connecticut's ECEC system, calling for a proposed state investment of \$148 million in fiscal year (FY) 2025, the plan's first year. While not fully funding the proposed increase, the Connecticut General Assembly did provide an additional \$45 million in funding in the FY 2025 budget, of which \$20 million came from one-time, federal funds through the *American Rescue Plan Act*.²⁴⁹ Because a significant portion of this funding was temporary, it was primarily aimed at stabilizing the child care sector in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than establishing permanent increases to provider compensation or expanding their capacity to enroll more children.

In its FY 2026 appropriations, the state took a significant step toward long-term investment in the sector by establishing a \$300 million Early Childhood Education Endowment, using surplus funds from the FY 2025

244 Maki Park and Jazmin Flores Peña, *The Invisible Work of Family, Friend, and Neighbor Caregivers and Its Importance for Immigrant and Dual Language Learner Families* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2021).

245 Abdo-Katsipis and Ruth, *State of Early Childhood*.

246 Cyr et al., *State of Early Childhood*; Park and Flores Peña, *The Invisible Work of Family, Friend, and Neighbor Caregivers*.

247 Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, "Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care."

248 Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, "Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care."

249 Office of the Governor, "Governor Lamont Asks Legislature to Approve Funding Increase for Early Childhood Education" (press release, February 2024).

budget. The endowment was fully invested in a long-term, diversified portfolio and is designed to function outside the annual state budget process, with capped annual drawdowns to ensure sustainability.²⁵⁰ By establishing a dedicated, investment-based fund outside of the annual budget process, the endowment offers a stable and sustainable means of advancing Connecticut’s ECEC system.

Home Visiting and Birth to Three Services

Home visiting and Birth to Three are two important early childhood programs that often work in tandem to serve young children and their families. Home visiting is a family-focused social service that involves trained professionals visiting families in their homes on a regular basis to provide guidance, resources, and education to expectant parents and parents with young children who are at risk for poor maternal and child health outcomes. Immigrant families can benefit greatly from home visiting services that offer help navigating early childhood, health, and social service systems; support home language development; and provide access to trauma-informed care.²⁵¹ However, immigrant families across the country are enrolled in home visiting programs less frequently than other families, and challenges low-income immigrant families often face are not typically used at the national level nor in Connecticut as indicators of service need. For example, indicators of vulnerability for young children, including living in a linguistically isolated household or having parents with limited English proficiency, are not treated as indicators that children should be prioritized for home visiting services—neither on their own nor in combination with other factors, such as low household income or low parental formal education.²⁵²

Connecticut currently uses five home visiting models: Parents as Teachers, Child First, Nurse-Family Partnership, Healthy Families America, and Early Head Start Home-Based Option.²⁵³ The state’s priority populations for services include families with incomes below the federal poverty level, parents with low educational attainment (less than a high school diploma), and parents under 20 years of age. Since immigrant parents comprise 36 percent of all Connecticut parents with young children living below 100 percent of the federal poverty level, and 63 percent of young children’s parents (age 25 or older) who have less than a high school diploma or equivalent, they are significant shares of two of these top target populations for home visiting.²⁵⁴ Existing state data do not make it possible, however, to tell whether immigrant families are being served proportionate to their representation within these priority groups.

Birth to Three services are part of the federal *Individuals with Disabilities Act* (IDEA) Part C, which focuses on early interventions.²⁵⁵ Within Connecticut, they are provided through community-based programs overseen and managed by the state’s Office of Early Childhood. Children are eligible for Birth to Three services in Connecticut if they have significant developmental delays or a diagnosed medical condition that is likely to result in a developmental delay.²⁵⁶ Like home visiting, Birth to Three services are typically delivered in

250 Office of the State Treasurer, “Treasurer Russell Announces Investment of \$300 Million in Newly Created Early Childhood Education Endowment” (news release, July 1, 2025).

251 Maki Park and Caitlin Katsiaficas, *Leveraging the Potential of Home Visiting Programs to Serve Immigrant and Dual Language Learner Families* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2019).

252 Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, *Connecticut Home Visiting System: Policy and Procedure Manual*.

253 Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, “Home Visiting,” accessed August 4, 2025.

254 MPI analysis of pooled 2019–23 ACS data.

255 U.S. Department of Education, “Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Part 303 (Part C) - Early Intervention Program for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities,” updated July 26, 2022.

256 Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, “Connecticut Birth to Three,” accessed May 22, 2025.

the child’s natural environment, often in the home. Birth to Three services are instrumental to identifying and addressing developmental delays in young children, including DLLs and children of immigrants, and to ensuring they receive early interventions to support their healthy development.

Both Birth to Three and home visiting services have the potential to create inclusive and supportive programming for immigrant families. By integrating strategies to address the unique needs of DLL and immigrant-background children within their frameworks, these programs can further enhance their accessibility and effectiveness. However, as the remainder of this subsection will discuss, there are barriers that have kept these programs from reaching their full potential, and more targeted support is needed to provide culturally and linguistically competent services to immigrant families in the state.

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Equitable Access

To access home visiting and Birth to Three systems, most families are referred by their primary health-care provider. Therefore, having reliable health care is essential for connecting families with these services. Young DLLs (those ages 0–5) in Connecticut were twice as likely as non-DLLs to lack health insurance in the 2019–23 period, and a much smaller share of young DLLs had access to private health insurance than non-DLLs (48 percent versus 72 percent).²⁵⁷ While Connecticut’s Medicaid program, the HUSKY Health program, uses state funding to extend coverage to a wider range of low-income noncitizens than are covered with federal funding,²⁵⁸ immigrant families who qualify may still face challenges to navigating enrollment processes due to language barriers and a lack of accessible information about available services.²⁵⁹

To address these concerns and expand enrollment beyond primary care physicians, Birth to Three services leverage “child find,” a component of IDEA Part C that requires statewide systems for identifying all children with disabilities. Connecticut’s Birth to Three program has a dedicated staff member who conducts community outreach, with the goal of dispelling misconceptions and informing families of support available to them, regardless of immigration status. The program also partners with the Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center, which has bilingual staff and helps families navigate the system and understand their rights. In contrast, home visiting does not have a comparable outreach strategy for any population, as programs are already operating at full capacity and are unable to serve all eligible families. According to a 2023 estimate from the National Home Visiting Resource Center, 168,400 families in Connecticut could benefit from home visiting, 44 percent of which met one or more priority criteria. Of those, 3,931 were served, 26 percent of which spoke a language other than English as their primary language.²⁶⁰ This gap of more than 164,000

²⁵⁷ MPI analysis of pooled 2019–23 ACS data.

²⁵⁸ Federal eligibility rules cover low-income lawful permanent residents (LPRs, also called green-card holders) with at least five years in that status, plus certain other groups. In Connecticut, green-card holders who are children or pregnant are covered even if they have fewer than five years in that status. State-funded HUSKY was extended in 2024 to also cover children age 15 and under who are part of income-qualifying families and whose immigration status makes them ineligible for federally funded coverage. See Section 5 of this report for more details.

²⁵⁹ Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, “Office of Early Childhood 2023 Legislative Session Public Act Summary Concerning Early Childhood” (summary of legislation, July 2023).

²⁶⁰ National Home Visiting Resource Center, “2024 Yearbook—State and Indigenous Profiles: Connecticut,” accessed May 22, 2025.

families underscores the urgent need to expand access to home visiting. And given the overlap between immigrant families and Connecticut’s defined priority populations, future growth and expansion would ideally include intentional investment in multilingual staff and community-informed outreach strategies to reach eligible limited English proficient (LEP) parents.

Home visiting and Birth to Three services in rural areas, particularly the northwest corner of the state, face significant challenges due to the existence of fewer programs and practitioners in these areas. This has reportedly led to longer wait times for services, with some areas pushing the 40-day mark for early interventions, compared to the 30-day average in more populated regions.²⁶¹ Transportation issues exacerbate these inequities, as practitioners in rural areas must travel longer distances between homes, reducing the number of families they can serve. Birth to Three early intervention services have made efforts to improve accessibility through remote services, allowing bilingual practitioners to connect with immigrant families in different parts of the state. However, remote services should be supplemental to in-person services, not the default method of working with families.

The Home Visiting and Birth to Three Workforce

While home visiting and Birth to Three programs strive to provide language access through translators and interpreters, according to interviewees, both fields are facing substantial challenges in recruiting and retaining practitioners of diverse backgrounds who can directly communicate with families in their native languages.²⁶² For Birth to Three, hiring challenges persist in part due to the demanding nature of the profession, which requires specialized training, emotional labor, and frequent travel to families’ homes. These demands, combined with limited workforce pipelines and few incentives to attract bilingual or multicultural professionals, make it difficult to recruit and retain staff who reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the families served. Although the program has been exploring partnerships with higher education institutions and seeking to develop associate-level pathways to increase workforce diversity, progress has been slow.

Home visiting services face similar challenges. While efforts are being made to provide bilingual services, demand often outstrips the supply of qualified bilingual practitioners. According to a study conducted by the University of Connecticut in 2020, 15 percent of home visitors spoke Spanish, compared to the 22 percent of families served that year.²⁶³ These challenges are concerning, given the need to expand services to other eligible yet underrepresented populations, including speakers of languages other than Spanish. And with programs already struggling to meet current needs, expansions to reach these underserved groups will require deliberate investment in workforce development strategies that prioritize linguistic and cultural competence skills.

Resources

Birth to Three, while federally mandated under IDEA Part C, relies heavily on state funding to operate. For fiscal years 2023–24 and 2024–25, Birth to Three services in Connecticut were allotted \$32.45 million, \$5

²⁶¹ Author interview with Connecticut Office of Early Childhood staff, September 5, 2024.

²⁶² Author interview with Connecticut Office of Early Childhood staff, September 5, 2024.

²⁶³ University of Connecticut, School of Social Work, Research Unit, *Home Visiting in Connecticut: Current Status, Future Directions* (Hartford: University of Connecticut, 2020).

million of which comes from the federal government annually.²⁶⁴ This is an increase of \$8.5 million, including \$2 million specifically designated for Spanish interpreter services for meetings with families.²⁶⁵ With approximately 85 percent of the program’s budget provided by state funding, the state’s continued financial support is clearly essential to sustaining and expanding these vital services.

Home visiting programs in Connecticut face ongoing funding challenges and uncertainties. The state allocates approximately \$22 million total for home visiting programs, with about \$10 million coming directly from federal Maternal, Infant, and Early

Home visiting programs in Connecticut face ongoing funding challenges and uncertainties.

Childhood Home Visiting funds and the remaining \$12 million from state funds.²⁶⁶ However, as noted earlier, this level of funding is sufficient to serve only a small fraction of families whose characteristics make them key targets for program services.

C. *Recommendations for Strengthening Early Childhood Services*

Connecticut has recently taken important legislative steps to improve resources for young children through the creation of the Early Childhood Education Endowment, the development of Early Start CT, and the expansion of the Care 4 Kids subsidy program. These actions complement other strategic efforts to strengthen early childhood services, including the creation of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care, expansion of HUSKY Health, and continued investments in Birth to Three and home visiting programs. These steps provide a strong foundation for improved service access, affordability, and quality for all Connecticut families with young children. However, ensuring the state’s efforts result in programs that are effective in reaching and serving its immigrant-background and DLL children—meaning they are able to address these children’s particular cognitive, socioemotional, and language development needs—requires intentional strategies to design and deliver such programs at scale. The following recommendations outline ways to strengthen existing early childhood system capacities and more effectively support these children’s kindergarten readiness and future education and career success.

Improving DLL Program Quality

Efforts to provide effective early childhood programming for the state’s DLL children appear to rest on a weak foundation—one that lacks an intentional design of interlocking policies, instructional approaches, and supports for implementing and sustaining quality programming at a scale commensurate with system-

²⁶⁴ State of Connecticut, *An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2025, and Making Appropriations Therefor, and Provisions Related to Revenue and Other Items Implementing the State Budget*, H.B. No. 6941, 2023 Legislative Session (June 5, 2023); Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, “Annual Part C Application,” accessed May 22, 2025.

²⁶⁵ Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, “P.A. 23-204 (H.B. 6941) – An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2025, and Making Appropriations Therefor, and Provisions Related to Revenue and Other Items Implementing the State Budget—Summary of Provisions Concerning Early Childhood” (budget summary for FY 2024–25, July 2023).

²⁶⁶ Connecticut General Assembly, “Connecticut Home Visiting System Summary” (data tables, February 13, 2025).

wide needs. The following actions can broadly help build capacity, engage families, and embed linguistically responsive practices across the state’s early childhood programs:

- ▶ **Include 4-year-old children under the state’s current K-12 requirements for provision of bilingual education programs.** Connecticut law mandates that whenever there are 20 or more students in a public school who share a dominant non-English language and who are not sufficiently proficient in English, that school district must provide them with bilingual education. The law currently focuses on providing bilingual education to students in kindergarten through grade 12, meaning preschool is not explicitly included under the law. Including preschool programs run by public schools under the law would provide a vehicle for scaling effective program designs for DLLs through an established system already familiar with these requirements, while also promoting better alignment of instructional designs across the preschool and elementary school years.
- ▶ **Leverage Early Start CT to support consistent DLL identification across ECEC programs.** Connecticut’s newly developed Early Start CT program presents an opportunity to implement a standardized and coordinated approach to identifying DLLs across multiple ECEC programs. This approach could leverage tools such as the home language survey already in use in K-12 settings to identify children’s home languages at enrollment. Building a unified identification system through Early Start CT could help ensure that DLLs consistently have access to key supports such as bilingual educators, translated materials for families, and culturally responsive instructional practices that promote both English and home language development.
- ▶ **Invest in educator and administrator skills for delivering effective DLL instruction.** Expanding professional development supports for educators on dual language development and culturally responsive practices, and for administrators on developing and sustaining effective instructional programs, is critical. Several states have sought to tackle these needs, including California and Illinois, both of which have developed extensive professional development systems focused on culturally and linguistically responsive approaches.²⁶⁷ Washington State has also made significant strides by investing in multilingual early learning resources and coaching for educators, supporting them in meeting the diverse needs of learners from different backgrounds.²⁶⁸
- ▶ **Create systemic approaches for engaging and partnering with families.** Building strong connections with parents that affirm the value of home languages and cultures is essential to becoming partners with them in promoting their children’s ongoing language development and early school success. However, as underscored in this report, several of the state’s early childhood programs are manifestly unable to meet service demands and nearly all programs lack a workforce able to engage effectively with LEP parents and to share information with them at a level commensurate to that received by non-LEP other parents. Given these realities, actors inside and outside government should consider launching a sustained multilingual campaign, in partnership with trusted community-based organizations, to reach immigrant-background parents of young children with clear, accessible information about their children’s early development and value of rich home language use to their

²⁶⁷ California Department of Education, “[Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching](#),” updated June 5, 2025; Illinois State Board of Education, “[Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards](#),” accessed May 22, 2025.

²⁶⁸ Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families, “[Professional Development and Training](#),” accessed May 22, 2025.

children’s brain development. Connecticut could build on strategies used in states such as Oregon, where regional Early Learning Hubs coordinate bilingual outreach and culturally responsive family engagement efforts.²⁶⁹ And with new platforms and technologies emerging that engage parents seeking to learn about and reinforce their young children’s developmental trajectories, directly arming the state’s immigrant-background parents with this information, in languages they most commonly speak, may help to redress some of the limits in current program capacities to effectively serve these families and their children.

Improving Early Childhood Education and Care

1. *Expand programs in underserved areas*

- ▶ **Following the recommendation provided in the Blue Ribbon Panel report, address child care deserts with increased funding that targets underserved communities.** Funding the establishment of more ECEC providers in underserved communities will promote equity not only for immigrant families but for all families struggling to access needed ECEC services. Priority should be given to establishing or expanding programs in child care deserts—especially rural and low-income areas—and to creating new programs in these regions, which often have high concentrations of immigrant families. In addition to these service expansions, it is important that sufficient funding is made available to ensure the quality of services remains consistent. By doing so, Connecticut can provide opportunities for every child, regardless of their background or location.

2. *Increase diversity among ECEC program staff*

Supporting the development of a workforce with skills responsive to the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of Connecticut’s DLL and immigrant-background children is essential to meeting these children’s needs and being able to communicate and engage with their families.

- ▶ **Streamline pathways for recognizing and certifying foreign education credentials.** This would remove barriers facing qualified immigrant educators seeking to enter the field, helping to both address staffing shortages and make the ECEC workforce more reflective of the cultural and linguistic diversity in Connecticut’s young child population.
- ▶ **Expand scholarships and tuition assistance for bilingual students pursuing careers in early childhood services.** Such measures would further strengthen the ECEC workforce by supporting individuals with essential skills for working with multilingual children and their families.
- ▶ **Incorporate language proficiency into compensation structures.** Recognizing the additional value bilingual educators bring to ECEC programs by offering wage differentials, stipends, or bonuses for using their language skills in instruction or family engagement could support their recruitment and retention.

²⁶⁹ Oregon Department of Early Learning and Care, “Early Learning Hubs,” accessed May 22, 2025.

3. Strengthen support for family child care providers

Family child care providers play a vital role in serving immigrant families, and targeted support could help them thrive and increase the availability of culturally and linguistically aligned care for DLLs and immigrant-background children. Strategies for doing so include:

- ▶ **Sustain and expand financial support through grants and subsidies to help family child care providers cover licensing, training, and facility improvement costs.** Connecticut has made notable investments through the Child Care Facilities Construction and Renovation Grant Program, which is administered by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, overseen by the Office of Early Childhood, and provides capital grants to help family child care providers improve health, safety, and quality.²⁷⁰ Additionally, the statewide Staffed Family Child Care Networks (SFCCNs), coordinated by United Way's 211 Child Care hub and regional partners, offer coaching, business assistance, and peer support to enhance provider sustainability and quality.²⁷¹ To build on this progress, expanding and stabilizing funding for both programs is critical. This would include transitioning the facilities grant program from temporary *American Rescue Plan Act* funding to permanent state support and renewing and increasing funding for SFCCNs to sustain and grow their services. Potentially leveraging the Early Childhood Education Endowment as a long-term financing source could ensure these efforts are integrated and sustainable, and strengthen family child care capacity statewide.
- ▶ **Reduce bureaucratic barriers, which can disproportionately affect immigrant providers.** This has been done in other states, such as California, where SB 234 prohibits localities from requiring zoning permits or business licenses for family child care homes, thereby simplifying the regulatory landscape.²⁷² Oregon has also undertaken efforts to revise zoning and licensing rules to better accommodate in-home child care provided within a residential structure.²⁷³
- ▶ **Expand initiatives such as the Early Childhood Business Incubator Program.**²⁷⁴ This could involve offering mentorship, shared facilities, and business development support for family child care providers, especially in underserved areas.

Improving Home Visiting and Birth to Three Services

1. Expand home visiting services for immigrant and DLL families

Home visiting programs offer critical support to many families in Connecticut, including immigrant and DLL families. However, they currently are unable to reach many eligible families that could benefit from this service. To address this, the state could:

- ▶ **Take steps to address program capacity issues and expand services.** Increasing investment and other resources will be necessary if programs are to reach eligible families, immigrant and U.S.

²⁷⁰ Local Initiatives Support Corporation, Connecticut, "Child Care & Early Learning Facilities," accessed August 6, 2025.

²⁷¹ Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, "Staffed Family Child Care Networks (SFCCN)," updated December 20, 2024.

²⁷² State of Oregon, "Application of Land Use Regulations to Family Child Care Home," *Oregon Revised Statutes* Vol. 9, Title 30, Section 329A.440, accessed July 15, 2025.

²⁷³ State of California, *An Act to Amend ... the Health and Safety Code, Relating to Family Daycare home*, SB 234, 2019 Legislative Session (September 5, 2019).

²⁷⁴ Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, "Learn About Family Child Care Home Incubators," updated August 19, 2025.

born alike. At the same time, strengthening partnerships with community organizations that serve immigrant populations would be a valuable strategy for creating effective referral points for eligible immigrant families.

- ▶ **Consider updating the priority population criteria for home visiting programs to include LEP and/or linguistically isolated families who meet one or more other priority population criteria.** A significant share of LEP families in Connecticut fall within one or more priority population for home visiting, such as living below the federal poverty level or having parents with less than a high school diploma or equivalent. While LEP status or household linguistic isolation may not warrant priority designation on its own, finding ways of acknowledging these alongside other qualifying factors could help keep these families from being overlooked.

2. Strengthen Birth to Three services for DLL and immigrant children

Early identification and intervention through Birth to Three programs are vital for young children with developmental delays or disabilities, including immigrant-background and DLL children. In order to be most effective, early intervention services should be timely and culturally and linguistically responsive.

- ▶ **Improve equitable access through flexible service delivery and expand language supports.** Combining in-person and remote service options can help reduce delays and long waitlists, particularly in rural areas where provider shortages are most severe. Additionally, expanding language access in evaluations and services to cover top languages beyond Spanish would help better serve Connecticut's diverse communities. After Spanish, the top four non-English languages spoken in DLLs' households in Connecticut are Portuguese, Polish, Chinese, and Haitian Creole;²⁷⁵ support in such languages could make early childhood services more accessible to children from these linguistic communities.

3. Expand efforts to create a representative and sustainable workforce for home visiting and Birth to Three programs

A diverse, well-supported workforce is essential for delivering effective services that meet the linguistic and cultural needs of immigrant families. Sustained investment in workforce development is critical to meeting growing demand and addressing persistent equity gaps.

- ▶ **Build targeted pipelines and improve support for bilingual early childhood professionals.** Establishing partnerships with higher education institutions, community colleges, and immigrant communities can help recruit and prepare a more linguistically and culturally responsive workforce. Providing tuition assistance, foreign qualification recognition support, and clear professional pathways, paired with increased compensation, bilingual stipends, and career advancement opportunities could aid in both attracting and retaining skilled professionals who reflect the families they serve.

²⁷⁵ MPI analysis of pooled 2019–23 ACS data.