



## State approves preschool funding

**Chris Seymour**  
Reporter, CABE

The State Legislature in May approved \$105 million in total bonding over the next 10 years to increase preschool openings in Connecticut's public schools.

*The CABE Journal* recently had the opportunity to talk with **Dr. Myra Jones-Taylor**, Commissioner of the state's recently created Office of Early Childhood (OEC), about some of the particulars of the program, including the application process.

Beginning in 2014-15, all school systems in the state will be able to apply for funding for preschool slots provided they also have a full-day kindergarten program, according to Jones-Taylor.

Jones-Taylor stressed that the bond funds eventually rewarded and paid out to districts will be a reimbursement for capital improvement costs they incur. "Districts can apply for it but really would be reimbursed," she explained. "A school can say, 'We have this room and we want to convert it to a PreK classroom and we just need to change the sinks or put in new desks,' things like that. So that's the first part of money that would come out this year [in 2014-15]."

However, before districts can apply for funding, the Office of Early Childhood must first design and send a document to districts called an "unmet needs report," according to Jones-Taylor; from there, her office will make the decision on what districts receive funding.

"In the legislation, we have to create an 'unmet needs report' and districts will submit this report to the Office of Early Childhood to show that there is actual need in their community," explained Jones-Taylor. "And this is a way to safeguard against what is often called, or increasingly called, 'crowd out,' which is the idea that community programs would be crowded out of the pre-K system as districts increasingly enter into this field. So, that is what the 'unmet needs report' is intended to prevent from happening."

According to Jones-Taylor, the state would then collaborate with school systems with respect to timing.

"We would need to work with districts to figure out how their timing works, in terms of their own budgetary process and figure out: is it helpful for them to apply for the bond funds first before they have gotten approval from their board of education to go ahead and include this in their budgets? So there is a lot of sequencing that has to happen," said Jones-Taylor.

According to **Diana Lejardi**, Director of Communications for the Office of Early Childhood, "The amount of funding distributed to school systems for 2014-2015 will depend on how many requests for funding the OEC receives and the information provided by the school districts. The amount of bond funding may not exceed \$15 million for 2014-2015 and may not exceed \$10 million for each subsequent year."

The Office of Early Childhood Commissioner underscored this new process presents a great opportunity for education professionals on the state and local levels to work together. "It is a huge opportunity to do some great partnering with districts so we are really excited for that opportunity," she said.

The following year, in 2015-16, districts that receive bond funding in 2014-15 would be able to apply for reimbursement for operating costs. "Right now in the budget you will notice there is no money for operating costs and that was intentional by the Legislature because they realized this would not be up and running by this school year; so next school year, 2015-16, districts can apply for the operating costs."

Jones-Taylor emphasized that the funding for preschool slots is "a brand new program in which the policies have not been created." She added, "So many things have not been put in place yet. So there are a lot of things that have to happen before we actually get these funds out. That is not to say that there is not a commitment to do this with a sense of urgency."

Indeed, Jones-Taylor noted that the approval of the funds is recognition by state officials and lawmakers that there is a need for early childhood education.

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“I think what this does is it is a recognition that there is a need outside of our traditional school readiness districts, the priority districts and the competitive districts to recognize that we have children who do not have access to high quality care,” she observed. “We are really expanding

access, so I think what we will see hopefully is that there will be more opportunities for children outside of the communities with the highest densities of poverty.”