



*Joint Hearing with House Committees on Human Services and Education- February 7, 2024*

For the record, my name is Kristen Dunne. I am the executive director of Mary Johnson Children's Center, a 54 year old non-profit organization providing care and learning to children in infancy through age 12. We serve approximately 150 children who attend kindergarten through fifth grade in our afterschool /summer school age program, located in Addison County at the Mary Hogan Elementary School in Middlebury. Our mission is to nurture children and families of all backgrounds to strengthen belonging and well-being.

I am here to speak today on behalf of regulated providers and our ability to access funds for the development and health of afterschool programs as the legislature originally intended in Act 78. This dedicated source of funding is specifically intended for all programs and is currently inaccessible to programs like mine. I ask that you support the creation of a Special Fund so that grants can be administered as intended, for a mixed delivery system, the system that was built from community efforts forty years ago to serve school age children and their families.

Programs in our area strive to positively influence the development of children and help them thrive by providing safe and inclusive places to connect with peers, navigate friendships, and to engage and initiate the explorations of their interests. Programs pride themselves in not separating care from learning, offering a safe place where kids of all backgrounds and current situations can explore their potential within a community setting. Afterschool programs provide Vermont families representing the diversity of our communities with peace of mind that their kids are safe and cared for when they are not able to be home with them.

Programs like Mary Johnson Children's Center must be able to access funding to begin new programs; there is simply no other option. A lack of funding is prohibitive. If the intention is for funding to go directly to LEAs to then be dispersed to community programs, this is very concerning. You will simply be adding unnecessary processes and administrative burdens to an already overstretched education system. Addison Central School District provides our program with space to serve children in afterschool and summer programming, of course for the children, but also because they simply want an experienced provider to create programs and to manage all that comes with starting, running and maintaining them. This trust is key to our success. Everyone with children's best interests in mind should be using their time wisely, rather than on unnecessary processes. We have the responsibility to remove barriers to participation in afterschool programs, regardless of where and with whom the burdens land.

The grassroots approach that built our afterschool programming in Vermont decades ago was the first indication of the strengths that can be harnessed to achieve primal goals—diversity in and of itself. I ask that you honor the voice of the people by respecting the original intentions of the legislature. Create a Special Fund to disperse the funds. Our children cannot keep waiting.