

My name is Christina Nelson and I am an Early Childhood Educator and owner of a Registered Family Child Care home in North Troy. I have operated my program for almost 30 years and have been a public PreK partner for almost 10 years.

I opened my own childcare business out of necessity. My husband and I had 4 children under 6 that needed childcare and at that time we did not qualify for CCFAP and we could not find available childcare for all children in one location.

When I began my business, I had no idea how to do this correctly. I focused on professional development, reading current research into best practice, gaining an understanding and application of quality measures, assessments, and developmentally appropriate programming. My business was the first star rated program in Vermont's Quality Rating system – STARS in 2003. Currently, I am working towards a MA in Early Childhood Education.

Overtime, as I developed my own skills and expertise, I began to consult nationally as a mentor for Homegrown Childcare; here in VT offering TA and support through Lets Grown Kids. In these roles I meet with program leaders and educators to identify areas of growth and implement quality measures. I offer professional development opportunities to early educators through Northern Lights at CCV. I am a board member for VTAEYC; and serve as a professional development specialist for the Council for Professional Recognition.

Today I come before you as an Early Educator, a mother of 5, and grandmother of 8. From each of these perspectives I would like to sincerely thank you for putting a bill forward with a focus on childcare and for recognizing the need for bold change rather than small tweaks to the struggling childcare system. By introducing S56 you have crafted a transformational bill for all Vermont and for that I am grateful. I have read the bill, I see great strides in alleviating some of the most pressing concerns that Vermont's population faces today.

As an Early Childhood Educator and business owner I am particularly pleased with many pieces of the bill:

The proposed property tax break for family childcare homes and for landlords offering program occupancy will be helpful in defraying some of our expenditures, in turn, helping both sustainability and helping build capacity within the Early Education workforce.

Proposed changes to the CCFAP program including Increasing in CCFAP rates and basing payments on the cost of care rather than market rates including professional wages and switching to an enrollment-based payment system rather than attendance-based payments, will all help with sustainability and budgeting, and further strengthen business practices in child care businesses.

Providing staff retention bonuses, the tiered professional compensation integrated into the CCFAP payment system and providing additional funding for early educator scholarships will help remove educational barriers, as well as retain and recruit Early Educators into the work force.

As a mother and grandmother, I am happy to see the increase in CCFAP eligibility and for the elimination of the work, education and health eligibility requirements - so that CCFAP eligibility is based solely on family income. This removes stigma, improves financial stability, and decreases familial stressors.

Increasing the eligibility to 450% of the federal poverty level though, could have the unintended consequence of a dramatic cliff for middle income VT families. Increasing the eligibility to at least 600% of poverty can eliminate this cliff and support middle income families. Families should not fear that receiving a small raise will negatively affect their family because they fell off the CCFAP eligibility cliff.

As a resident of a rural farming border community, creating a non-citizen child care assistance program for families who are not eligible for CCFAP due to citizenship status ensures that ALL children have equal opportunities to high quality early education programs that, as research has proven, can positively change the trajectory of their lives.

For these inclusions into S56, I am very grateful and extremely optimistic.

My concerns with the current bill are directly related to the UPK changes proposed.

Universal Pre-K works best in a mixed delivery system. I have utilized a UPK mentor for many years and currently I offer PreK under a provisional license granted by my superintendent while I finalize the licensing requirements. Vermont's current mixed delivery system provides families with many options as they decide what type of care and education they want for their children. Some families want smaller groups, some have medically fragile children and prefer continuity of care in their community based program, some have timid children who, as they are afforded multiple years in the same setting with the same teacher blossom into leaders of the group, some have multiple children and need to have them at the same location – the list of considerations is as unique as the families that consider them.

Current regulations state that a registered home can only have 6 children under the age of 5. Of those 6, only 2 can be under the age of 2. If we lose 4-year-olds from our programs we can't just replace them with babies. Having all 4-year olds in public schools would have a drastic negative impact on programs like mine – the numbers just don't work – and could lead to closures of programs due to not being able to fill our slots, create more group turnover and disrupt families.

While the current UPK regulations require a 10 hour per week educational requirement, my program already offers a full day, full year PreK program. It is play based, nature based and developmentally appropriate. And, because my program begins at birth and continues through age 12 for afterschool, individualizing curriculum is natural and uninterrupted – because I know what they know, their interests, their learning styles and what they NEED to know. I can integrate learning goals into multiple domains, multiple times, and scaffold attempts, introduce further supports and experiences and celebrate mastery – for each child, all day, all year for as long as it takes. And because I offer a multi-age setting, no child feels stigma for not “keeping up with his/her peers” and my “leaders” learn that part of their strength is helping others and accepting that we all do the best we can with the skills we have at any given time. Learning is a continuum. The existing mixed delivery system ensures families can decide if this learning continuum and continuity of care is valuable to themselves and their child. The proposed bill would remove children from existing private PreK programs and limit's families access to a diversity of programs. There is a saying that it takes a village to raise a child, I agree with that statement. But- we need to listen to the villagers regarding their children – we don't move the village.

Again, I want to express my sincere appreciation for putting a childcare bill forward and thank you for your time today. I ask you to please support the bold innovations in S.56 relating to CCFAP – they will truly help Vermont families. And I ask you to consider changes to the bill that will preserve our current

mixed delivery system for universal Pre-K so that families can have access to a variety of PreK programs that fit their needs, whether that's in community programs or public schools.