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April 11, 2023

Dear Committee,

It is with much appreciation that I was asked to speak on behalf of children, families, and childcare providers.

I have been an early educator for over twenty-five years, working in various capacities of programs both for-profit and non-profit. Fourteen years ago, I decided to open up my home childcare program as I was not making enough money to sustain living expenses and childcare, even with a discount from the program I worked in. Unfortunately, this is still true for many of our early educators today.

I quickly learned how isolating my new world was as a childcare provider; not having the resources, connections, and comradery as I did in a larger program, I reached out to other home providers and began a network. This network is still vibrant today with over eleven home early educators. As the network leader, I have been responsible for organizing meetings, professional development, and helping to preserve and grow home childcare programs. Our discussions spread across a wide range to support one another with families and children, licensing questions, covid, and even celebrating one another. We have essentially developed our own community sharing our wealth of insight and experience. These kinds of networks are very important and I encourage you to support their growth statewide.

Having a bachelor's in early education and my teaching license, I became an Act 166 provider about eight years ago. This was an incredible turning point in my career as this is when I also became aware of the many hurdles families and childcare providers were facing. The silver lining was being able to offer a mixed delivery, affordable, high-quality program, and ten hours of free preschool to families. During this time I have served children in a mixed-aged classroom ranging from two weeks to five years and during covid, I offered care to school agers during their remote days. It is evident that children are both wonderful learners and teachers to one another! Being able to watch a timid two or three-year-old become a confident leader at age four and five with peers is a ray of sunlight. By separating three and four-year-olds as suggested in some of the bills introduced this year, children would lose that monumental milestone that develops and could ultimately be more detrimental in the long run.

As a private Act 166 provider, children have the luxury to learn during all parts of their day and families have the flexibility for their children to be in care in one setting for the whole day. For children this is ideal as they are developing strong connections to peers and teachers, allowing rich learning to occur. By continuing to preserve a mixed delivery system, children and families

will continue to create a vibrant community, strong children, and a healthy workforce. Families need longer care for children than the school day can provide and not all young children learn best in a school setting with more children, transitions, and unpredictabilities. At an early age, children learn how to cope and function as an individual. Some children need more practice than others and need this on a smaller scale. By offering a mixed delivery system more children's needs are met and set more children up for success in the long run for public education. As an early educator, I have supported both public and private pre-K for families based on the child's needs, not on the need of the family. Expanding funding for Act 166 students to support more than ten hours of pre-K would allow families to truly make the best decision for their child's needs.

In addition to expanding funding for Act 166 students, increasing the Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) would allow many more families to access high-quality, affordable child care. Currently, many families grapple with the difficult choice of providing care to their young children and sacrificing other essential needs. However, as these discussions happen I think it is prudent to discuss and think about how the mechanisms work for families and programs. As an early educator leader, I frequently hear the challenges that both families and providers face with the CCFAP system. Families struggle with the application process, while there is a disconnect with providers getting paid. An example of this would be families being granted certificates of approval for subsidies and those are shared with providers. However, the flaw is that the process takes far too long for those approvals to happen which creates a hardship for families to pay tuition. Some programs expect tuition in order to function, while other programs might be able to float those costs which are also not financially sustainable. While the system is supposed to be seamless, I think it is important to review this process to make it easier for both families and programs to receive certificates in a timely manner.

After reading S.56 and seeing all the wonderful proposals in the bill I am hopeful that early education is heading in the direction of a profession. The hard work that early educators do to prepare children for elementary school and beyond is essential to our society. In the spirit of valuing and recognizing Early Education as a profession, it is essential that I advocate for affordable healthcare for all early educators of both public and private programs. Increasing CCFAP would allow this to happen. As a private provider and parent of three active children in sports, I have experienced firsthand what it is like for my family to go without insurance. I have experienced needing to pay for basic health needs, broken legs, mammograms, and MRIs, all out of pocket. This is not what any family in our state should have to endeavor. If early educators are constantly struggling to figure out how to pay for basic medical care, it makes it even harder to provide the highest quality of care to the children in our programs.

In summary, I would love to echo the following to be considered when reviewing the bill.

- A mixed delivery system
- Three/four-year-olds remain combined
- Increased Act 166 funding
- Expansion of CCFAP
- Review of application/certificate process

Affordable healthcare for all

Thank you again for reading my story and keeping the well-being of children, families, and providers at the forefront of your work. I understand the many complexities and challenges it is to discuss and making these very tough decisions.

With much appreciation,  
Kelley Hackett