

Good Morning,

2/16/23

Thank you for inviting me today to testify on S.56. My name is Christina Goodwin. I have been an early childhood educator for over 20 years and am the Executive Director at Pine Forest Children's Center in Burlington. As an early childhood educator and parent of young children, I am asking you to support this important bill as well as hear important insights and feedback, so we can ensure this bill is framed in a way that truly supports families and early childhood educators in our state.

As a non-profit early childhood education program, Pine Forest strives to create a diverse learning community for all families where all children can learn and grow. We have 70 children enrolled from infants through preschoolers and 17% of them receive Child Care Financial Assistance (CCFAP). We have a robust Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) with a full time chef who prepares 3 meals a day ensuring that all children at PFCC have access to healthy, nutritious meals which has been crucial during the pandemic.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children's Audacious Vision outlines that each and every child, beginning at birth, has the opportunity to benefit from high quality early childhood education, delivered by an effective, diverse, well-prepared and well-compensated workforce. This vision is something hundreds of early childhood educators embrace in this state as a sight line for the future we want to build for children, families and early childhood educators. I also believe that this is a shared goal that we all have in this room today.

When I read through bill S.56 I see it as a fantastic starting point. It sets the ground floor, the foundation, for a sustainable early childhood education ecosystem that provides support and scaffolds families with young children and the people who call this their profession. I can see areas with huge positive impacts, and others that may have unintended negative consequences. In Vermont, we find ourselves in a unique space where early childhood educators are ready to redesign this system and are ready to partner with the state to bring our work as a field to fruition. We have worked for years to reduce the fragmentation of our field and have agreed to call ourselves early childhood educators within the early childhood education field. I hope you can join us by using this terminology so we can ensure a clear understanding of who we are, what we do, and why we do it.

There are aspects of this bill that will have major positive impacts on early childhood education. First, the CCFAP pieces of the bill would have a transformative effect on my program, and would support more families to access and afford early childhood education than ever before. Presently PFCC serves 64 families, representing 70 children. 17% of these families currently receive CCFAP and for all of them, they currently have no co-payment. This has a huge impact on families who are struggling to pay bills, find affordable housing, and access food resources.

At present there are many families who fall just slightly outside the eligibility requirements who are struggling. As proposed in the bill, if the FPL is expanded in FY25 to 450%, 24 more families would be able to access CCFAP funding along this sliding scale. For some this would still require a co-payment, however yearly tuition for an infant or toddler is \$17,160 a year. For many families this means they are paying more than 10% of their income on tuition and deferring other bills such as student loans to make ends meet. These proposed changes to the FPL would mean that 50% of our current school community would be able to access financial support in order to offset their out of pocket tuition costs. By removing all work, education, and health eligibility requirements for families so that eligibility for CCFAP is determined solely on income, means you increase the impact CCFAP can have on families with young children. To reiterate, these changes would have a huge impact on families' quality of life. Thank you.

If S.56 had happened 10 years ago, as a family of 4, this increased rate would have saved my husband and I thousands of dollars in tuition. In turn, we could have put more money toward paying off our student loans, paying down our mortgage and contributing more to our local economy. Imagine the impact expanding beyond 450% of the FPL could have on Vermont families. Many of the families in our program are middle-income and would likely fall just over the proposed cap for CCFAP (450%). With rates rising to reflect the actual cost of care across programs, they will see dramatically increased child care rates and no state support to pay for them. I'm not sure how the families in my program will be able to afford that without help from CCFAP.

In addition, if CCFAP were to shift to an enrollment model as outlined in S.56, the income we receive would be steady and predictable, allowing us to more accurately predict that line item of our budget. If CCFAP were to shift to a cost of care model rather than the market rate, also proposed in S.56, that would mean that my Board of Directors and I could work together to project increases in compensation as well as increased benefits for our early childhood educators. Changes made to CCFAP during last year's legislative session helped to fill the gap for our program between what CCFAP was paying and true cost of care which increased our tuition income. These additional changes would provide stability for our families as well as our program.

In addition to the proposed CCFAP investments in S.56, I am grateful for additional investments in our vital early childhood education workforce. We have a workforce shortage across many sectors in Vermont. In early childhood education, that shortage means programs are often reducing enrollment, closing classrooms from time to time, reducing operating hours, and struggling to hire qualified candidates. Our workforce shortages then impact other sectors as parents cannot return to the workforce or are forced to reduce their hours. In order to pay our early childhood educators compensation commensurate with their credentials, we would need to significantly increase tuition. Our school works closely with our families and we know that they

cannot afford to pay more. In order to rebuild our workforce we need investments in compensation that are comparable to our Prek-12 counterparts in public schools. I appreciate that S.56 requires programs receiving CCFAP funding to agree to provide compensation to early childhood educators in line with compensation standards as this is the foundation for our field becoming well-compensated.

Funding for scholarships is having an impact on early childhood educators statewide and this investment in the workforce benefits young children and their families - I'm happy to see this funding continued in the bill. Our program has a teacher currently enrolled in the TEACH scholarship program who is working toward her Associates Degree. We have a teacher working on an alternative path to licensure in order to obtain her birth through grade 3 teaching license through AOE. Two recent college graduates in our program are accessing the Student Loan Repayment Program. In all these scholarship funds are saving these educators thousands of dollars and in turn their skills are being invested in the ECE ecosystem as a benefit to young children and families. When we build up our current workforce and put into place supports for the future workforce, we can ensure accountability and sustainability moving forward.

In addition, retention bonuses have made an impact on our school community over the last 2 years. I know that funding has helped support many of our early childhood educators through the stressful and unprecedented times we have faced. This bonus model has shown that investments into the field has led to retention of our current workforce and allowed programs to offer sign on bonuses to new employees. This model could be used to support a compensation and benefits model as the groundwork has been laid, and provides a blueprint for moving forward. Thank you for continuing to invest in early childhood educators in this bill.

As you can tell, there is a lot in S.56 that I believe would support Vermont's children, families, early childhood educators, and child care programs of all types. This is incredibly exciting. However, I do have concerns about the proposed changes to Universal Preschool in the bill as introduced. Our current Universal pre-K system utilizes a mixed delivery system, in line with national best practice, that gives families the choice of accessing high-quality pre-Kindergarten in the setting that works best for them.

Children deserve the right to play, learn, grow and flourish in environments that are designed for their well being. Their families need a diversity of options when deciding where their children spend their 0-5 years which are the most crucial for brain growth and development. Every year I give dozens of tours of our school to prospective families. I end every tour welcoming families to join our community, while also encouraging them to find an educational home for their child. The proposed changes to universal pre-K remove that option for families, making families have to choose public school over private programs. Instead of continuing the diversity of options and partnerships currently in place, it risks further pitting the early childhood education system

against the K-12 system when in fact they should be one big continuum of learning. Presently PFCC partners with 9 school districts across Chittenden and Addison Counties. These partnerships help to build strong connections for families between their early childhood education experience and their transition to Kindergarten. These relationships are valuable in ensuring that children and their families are fully prepared for the next part of their educational journey.

The proposed changes to pre-K in the bill could also have significant unintended consequences for my program and many others in this state. Universal pre-K has provided a much-needed boost to private partner programs to support staff professional development, in addition to providing sustainable funding to programs and families. These proposed changes would also continue to perpetuate the loss of high quality early childhood educators to the public school system as they can offer better compensation, benefits, and much more generous time off. I worry that this may in fact create further instability by fragmenting our early childhood education system.

Recently I participated in a panel alongside colleagues in leadership roles in public education throughout the state. I heard about their staffing shortages, crises and most importantly the learning gaps their students were facing. As the only 0-5 representative, I know that my system is the foundation for every child on their educational journey. When all children have access to high quality early childhood education, they have a strong foundation for future learning and success. They are more attentive in classrooms, have higher test scores by third grade, and are emotionally fluent. They are prepared to learn. Investment in 0-5 will pay off in the long run for all Vermonters, and we must do it right.

We as adults are obligated to do what is just and right for ALL of Vermont's children. Let's partner together to make sure this bill has an impact immediately and builds a pathway for next steps. Again, this bill lays the floor, but does not set the ceiling for what early childhood education can and should be in Vermont. It is going to take some big system changes and I appreciate you as a committee for taking a look at the early childhood education system and its interconnectedness to so many other business sectors and services for children and families. Thank you for your work on behalf of Vermont's children and families and those of us who work with them.