

Good morning and thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you today.

By way of introduction, my wife Lisa and I own and operate Heartworks Preschools in Burlington, Shelburne, Williston and Stowe, The Renaissance Elementary School and Endeavour Middle School in Shelburne and the Loveworks Child Care Center on the National Life Group Campus in Montpelier.

Each week, we welcome nearly 400 children into our programs and provide them with outstanding, high quality educational programs that focus on what we consider to be the Four Pillars of academic and life success:

- Academics
- Social skills
- Emotional skills
- Life skills

Diane Rooney and Louise Piche started Heartworks preschools nearly 30 years ago with a mission and specific intent to differentiate their programs as true preschools as compared to traditional daycare services. They were true visionaries and leaders in this approach and they created a program that built on the best research in child development, a strong age appropriate curriculum and a highly qualified faculty.

Our two children attended Heartworks and Renaissance Schools and my wife Lisa was the Director of the Heartworks Williston Preschool for 12 years. In 2013, Diane and Louise retired and Lisa and I had the good fortune to acquire the schools and the opportunity to carry on the tradition of excellence Diane and Louise established during their 25-year tenure as the stewards of the schools.

My goal today is to help the committee understand the potential implications of the proposed legislation from the perspective of a program operator with a strong commitment to the shared goal of ensuring that all Vermonters are able to access the highest quality early childhood education and make it as affordable as it can possibly be for them. I believe we are all aligned in this goal, but as with any discussion

of this nature, I believe it's essential to bring as many perspectives and as much data to bear on the question as is humanly possible.

My sense is that while the proposed legislation has been drafted with the best of intentions, that there are unforeseen and unintended consequences that are important to explore so that we have the highest likelihood of achieving the goal of making the highest quality and most affordable early childhood education services available to all Vermonters.

My assessment of the proposed legislation is that, as written, it will produce a circumstance that will result in a decrease in availability of high quality early childhood education opportunities for Vermont families along with a substantial increase in the cost of providing it. Both of these outcomes are in direct contradiction to everyone's intent.

Let me begin by framing this discussion more broadly than just the Pre-kindergarten education contemplated by this proposed legislation. Pre-kindergarten is the culmination of a child's early childhood education which essentially starts at birth and continues until they reach their kindergarten and elementary school years. Private preschool providers such as Heartworks have over decades built an ecosystem and infrastructure focused on the critical years – birth to five – during which so much of a child's development occurs and on which their future success rests. The changes that the proposed legislation contemplates, while limited to pre-kindergarten will have far reaching implications for the entire birth to 5 ecosystem and infrastructure that has been so essential to Vermont children, families, our economy generally and to workforce development specifically. Without access to high quality affordable early education, many parents could not work, companies, would be challenged to find staff and we would further stifle the growth of our state's economy generally.

My interest today, as a Vermonter who raised two children in this state and could not have done so without access to high quality early childhood education, as a citizen taxpayer, and a business owner who provides high paying jobs with a comprehensive benefit program to nearly 80 Vermonters we count among our staff and faculty, is to ensure that any steps we take do not put the vibrant, healthy and effective early childhood education ecosystem and infrastructure at risk.

I ask that the committee consider two issues in particular that I believe put this ecosystem and Vermont families at substantial risk:

The first issue is with regard to teacher credentialing requirements. In the legislation and under CDD regulations, the credentials required for preschool teachers are already limiting the number of available teachers. The number of candidates that either have the required credentials or that our colleges are graduating is simply not enough to meet the demand. Early childhood education is a career path that too few college graduates pursue so the supply of credentialed teachers is simply not enough to meet the demand for them. This isn't an issue of pay or benefits, it's simply an issue that most education degree candidates focus their studies and pursue careers in the elementary, middle and high school grades.

Historically, the way that early childhood education providers have staffed their centers is with high school graduates and college graduates with degrees in other than education, providing training and educational opportunities to ensure that the care and education they provided met state standards and produced quality outcomes as children moved to kindergarten. This has worked well, and in Heartworks experience, many of our best teachers came to us without credentials in early childhood education, but with a strong commitment and passion for their craft and profession. They have provided outstanding care and early childhood education for, in some cases decades and count hundreds of children who passed through their classrooms as success stories both for their work and for the high quality of the program they delivered. Today, we could not hire many of these teachers or people like them.

The net effect of this is that centers will be unable to staff classrooms, making access to care and education less available to Vermont children. We're already seeing this happen with a number of home and center-based programs closing. This isn't the intent of the proposed legislation or the CDD regulations, but it is the consequence – unintended though it may be.

The standard reply to this issue as I've raised it throughout the education community is that there are plenty of programs designed to help teachers achieve the necessary credentials. True, but not the whole story – these programs have limited capacity to begin with, and virtually all of it is being consumed by teachers already in the system who must

get these credentials just to be able to stay employed in the early child education field.

I am not here to argue that the credentialing regulations aren't a good idea, I understand the research that suggests a strong correlation between teacher credentials and outcomes. However, this argument ignores two essential considerations – it does no one any good if there simply aren't enough credentialed teachers to fill classrooms. Unlike K-12, you simply can't just increase class sizes – teacher to student ratios are fixed – so if you can't find a teacher, you can't open a classroom. Hence the outcome that these regulations will result in fewer preschool classrooms, families will have an impossible time finding care for their children and the downstream impact of that is far-reaching for the state broadly.

Again, this isn't about money – what teachers are paid specifically – it doesn't matter what you offer to pay a teacher if there simply aren't enough of them that meet the credentialing requirements. I can tell you that this isn't just a problem because we're a small state with a limited number of colleges and workers. My wife and I had the opportunity to visit a group of preschools in Greater Boston a couple of weeks ago. Massachusetts implemented similar credentialing regulations to ours in 2011. The net effect has been to severely constrict the supply of teachers to the point that this organization that operates 23 preschools and employs nearly 500 teachers is what they called a "hiring crisis". They are only able to fill about 85% of their program's capacity, thereby limiting families access to preschool. The only solution to this problem is to develop more pathways into early childhood education careers that encourage high school graduates who can't or won't pursue a degree and college graduates that did not major in early childhood education to pursue additional education and vocational training, *without* requiring sending everyone off to college in hopes they'll find their way to a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and then a career.

The second issue I want to address is the drive to integrate pre-kindergarten into the public school infrastructure. I won't weigh in on the wisdom of this effort, other than to say that if the belief is it will deliver higher quality care and education than centers like Heartworks, I would invite you to tour our classrooms, meet our teachers and talk with our parents. There is no higher quality program than what we offer and it is not possible that a public school program could match what we deliver.

That having been said, what I really want to focus on this morning is the financial implications of moving children out of the existing early childhood education ecosystem. As a baseline, center based providers charge in the neighborhood of \$13,000 annually for preschool. We know that the cost of public education is about \$19,000 per student. Moving children into the high cost infrastructure of public schools is unlikely to address either of the stated goals around early childhood education – it won't materially improve quality and may actually decrease it, and at the same time it will make it less affordable for the state. While, public preschool is often touted as "free", it isn't. It comes with a cost that is substantially higher than independent centers. Essentially, the drive to move pre-kindergarten students into public schools will produce no better outcome at a substantially higher cost. That seems to be a sub-optimal outcome for families and for taxpayers.

The second financial implication of this move is that the community of children under 3 years of age will begin to make up a larger share of the center-based capacity. As classrooms of pre-k students close, they will be filled with children under 3. The impact of this from an economic perspective is substantial given the student/teacher ratios of 1:4 or 1:5 as compared to the pre-k ratios of 1:10. As the ratio of under 3 year old classrooms rises, the cost of providing that care and education will increase substantially. As an indicator, this is exactly what has happened in Massachusetts. As they have shifted pre-k students into their public school infrastructure, tuition has risen to as much as \$20,000 annually for a typical preschool – not an elite preschool – just a regular preschool staffed with young, inexperienced teachers providing basic early childhood education. This economic outcome will come to pass here in Vermont as well. And again, it's an outcome that is unintended and contradictory to the goal of making early childhood education more affordable for Vermont families.

It is my fervent hope that the committee will seriously consider this testimony as it moves forward with consideration of this legislation, and fully assess the substantial economic impacts and burdens that it will place on Vermont families, employers and taxpayers before adopting it as proposed.