

To the House and Senate Appropriations Committee,

First, let me say that I appreciate the chance to share my thoughts on the state budget.

Specifically I would like to address the Governor's long-awaited proposal to increase the Child Care Financial Assistance Program by 7.5 million.

My name is Joanna VonCulin. I am a resident of Middlesex, Vermont but I work as a Director for the non-profit Puffer Child Care Center in Morrisville. I see first-hand how the state's budget impacts working families and their children. Please support the Governor's proposal to increase funding the Child Care Assistance Program – it is desperately needed, as well as the best possible investment in Vermont's future.

As a program, we are constantly striving to improve our quality of care, and to keep up with changes in child care regulations and requirements. There is a steep cost associated with quality improvement, but families cannot afford to pay more than they already do. Over the last decade, and especially since the new regulations came out, I have watched the tasks and reports asked of centers increase to an alarming degree. Children and their care and safety must remain our first priority, always. But we also must meet the new demands in order to remain open and available to families. As a result, our budgets have gotten ever tighter, pushing centers even closer to the edge. I cannot currently pay a living wage to the staff – and yet they are being asked to have college degrees. They have no health benefits, no disability insurance, no life insurance, essentially no safety net. Most of them rely on state programs to make ends meet. This is not a sustainable state of affairs. As a result, the field of early education is losing its best talent.

Typically we lose our best staff to the school system, where they have benefits, insurance, summer and vacations off and are paid roughly twice as much. I recently ran an ad for a substitute on three separate websites – including the State of Vermont’s job page. I received one, single, unqualified resume. This has become the norm.

We want to be a Five Star center, with highly qualified staff, top quality programming and an exceptional environment for the children in our care. We’d also like to expand to meet the growing need in our community. But these things cost. Staff have to be able to make ends meet as well as save a bit for a rainy day before they can free up the time and energy necessary to increase their qualifications. Early Childcare Teachers that are worried about making the month’s rent aren’t in a place to sign up for classes financially or emotionally. I also need to be able to compete with the school system to obtain quality staff – and to do that I have to at least be able to pay them at least a living wage.

Increasing the funding of the CCFAP budget would serve working families by increased access, and it would also help centers like mine adapt and grow with the changing times. It would help us attract and keep the quality of staff we need, reducing costly turnover. Staff themselves would be better able to perform their work and rise to meet quality care challenges. Vermont’s children would have a higher quality of care, and be able to enter school truly ready to learn. Putting the money here, where we can provide support for working families, and exceptional beginnings to their children, would have a ripple effect that would positively impact broad swaths of the State budget through the reduced cost of preventing problems rather than trying to fix them later.

Thank you again for this opportunity to speak to the need for this budget improvement. Please support the Governor's forward-thinking proposal of adding 7.5 million to the CCFAP budget.