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Testimony – Vermont House Education Committee

Again, my deepest thanks for inviting testimony at the very beginning of the biennium – Just as we build links with families, we in the early care and education fields which to build a relationship with all of you so that when you have questions, you will know who to call to get the answers.

The Greater Burlington YMCA is the largest provider of early care and education – serving over 250 children per day – in Vermont – and my current role is as the Director of the Y Early Childhood Program for employees of the University of Vermont Medical Center. I also teacher in the Education Division of Champlain College and have served as an international assessor of early childhood programs for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Washington, DC), an elementary school teacher and the proud parent a financial analyst with the DOD and an engineer for GE in charge of the aero dynamicity of their wind turbines throughout the world.

Wednesday, February 1, 2017 9:00 a.m.

Let's talk about the important need for high quality early care and education not only for the longitudinal benefits to children but to those of the Vermont workforce and society as a whole.

1. Parents need to work – the economics of living and career development are much different now than they were even 20 years ago. Our program is open 11.5 hours per day each week day. Our Parents work split shifts, weekend shifts, **long hours** to put food on the table. Some parents work several part-time jobs or 14 hour days and we need an early care and education system that meets these demanding parameters. We have children from over 11 different school districts ranging from Swanton to Montpelier to Monkton and their parents need early education in locations convenient to their work so they can get to the children quickly if needed AND THEIR TIME AWAY FROM THE CHILD IS LIMITED.

They need full-day programs that are open throughout the year so they may meet their employers' requirements – uninterrupted. It is wonderful to offer A **MIXED DELIVERY SYSTEM** that includes just the 10 hours of preschool per week option available in public schools- yet that represents a very slim minority of the families we all serve.

2. Parents with children in full-time early care and education programs are more readily available for expanded training opportunities at work if their children are in quality care AND for those unemployed – they can seek **employment when they do not have to take their children on the job interview.**
3. For them to be productive members of the workforce, PARENTS need the peace of mind provided through consistent, quality early care and education environments for their children. So many of our families, are hobbling together early care using friends, relatives and virtually complete strangers. One of our new families at the program with two young children were in tears when I called to say we had a full-time opening for their children. Dad's hours had been expanded at the hospital and mother's was returning to the workforce to help meet financial obligations. She worried if she put off going back to work, she would not find a position in her field since younger employees without child care needs were available to take the slot. Until we called them with a slot, they were piecing together care: two days per week with 1 grandparent, one day with another grandparent, one day per week with an aunt and the final day covered by the Floridian mother of a college friend who is here on a skiing junket.
4. We know from the Perry Preschool Study and the Abecedarian Project that children, especially those from lower income households, have a greater overall outcome when they share exemplary early care and education experiences. BUT THOSE HAVE TO BE CONSISTENT. Children whose social/emotional strength is developed in high quality programs between birth and age 5 are better prepared for the challenges of public school. Kindergarten teachers routinely share with us how excited they are to have our students in their classrooms: they are self-sufficient, can ask for help, toilet and dress independently and most important, SOLVE problems for themselves and their peers.
5. I can share with you, again, my own experiences as a public school teacher, an inspector of early childhood programs and now a college professor, how much better prepared children are for life - when they benefit from an early childhood environments specifically designed for **nurturing and developmentally appropriate challenges as you learned from the brain research. Whether that is center-based early care and education, public pre-school or in-home registered care – the fundamentals are all the same.**

What are those fundamentals of high-quality care?

1.) Well-educated, consistent teachers who can build strong relationships where children can trust that their needs will be met – the same way – by the same person – each day.

We had a student with us for three years who had been abandoned as an infant by a drug-addicted mother. The foster family adopted the child and we worked side-by-side with the parent to build a trusting, respectful environment where the child would see the same faces each day, know that the social rules of the program never changed – if he hit someone, he would be responsible for making it better

When it was time for nap, the one place he felt safest was my office where I would rock him in my arms and massage his right heel while he watched the door, then slept soundly with one eye partially open.

Children cannot take the calculated risks associated with extended learning if they do not have attachments to the adults in their lives.

It is the teachers who spend copious amounts of time observing children's behavior, recording their interests and assessing their needs – then TAKE THAT understanding of the child and turn it into curricular opportunities that ENGAGE a child's imagination and CHALLENGE their thinking to explore higher levels of cognitive and physical development. THE TEACHERS are the ones who share their insights about the hours the child spends in our programs with the parents in an effort to establish a comprehensive approach to meeting the child's individual needs AND supporting the family as it works its way through this challenge called parenting!

Teachers in full-time early care and education settings are now fulfilling the roles that grandparents and aunts & uncles would have shared a decade or two ago. Parents look to our teachers for guidance when establishing effective limits (discipline) for kids, when to start potty training and whether or not their child presents with early signs of developmental challenges such as language delays, Autism or Attention Deficit. If **we do not take the time** to build critical trust with parents, the job of the public schools is 10 times harder- especially for those parents for whom school was a negative experience.

What are those fundamentals of high-quality care?

2.) Small group sizes - with high adult ratios: 86-98% of the words a child has by 3 years old came from the adults around them: BELIEVE ME – my sons knew a lot of words that did not come from me!!! If teachers in large classrooms are too stressed by trying to meet the needs of too many children or if they do not have the background to know how to appropriately influence language development – they cannot have positive interactions that foster the empathy, respect and encouragement children need for appropriate development.

Jeanine Fitzgerald visited a preschool classroom of 22 children ages 3-4, 2 teachers and was told by the teacher, in front of a child, "Don't expect too much from him – he doesn't know how to speak and when he does, I don't have time to try and figure out what he is saying." Jeanine waited for a minute then turned to the child – "What do you think about that?" The child glared at the back of the teacher and said....."oopid ideot."

Those teachers were under the constant stress of handling the broad range of needs of so many children in large groups: likewise, the children suffered the constant stress of not being heard, engaged and even nurtured. That stress carries over to the rest of their lives – many of which are already affected by external stressors such as hunger, homelessness or parents with opiate addiction, abusive family members. TOGETHER – these form a TOXIC STRESS that sets their stress system permanently on high and reduces their ability to slow down enough to learn – anything – except survival: can't stay focused long enough to put the second shoe on: can't stay focused long enough to go from letter A to B in the alphabet – can't stay focused long enough to eat an entire meal and thus become malnourished. SMALL groups IN ANY MIXED DELIVERY SYSTEM – must be staffed with teachers trained in developmentally appropriate practice where the child directs his/her own learning at a level for which their brains are wired !! It is a lot like your first days back in legislative session when you are handed 200 pieces of legislation without a clue to what some of them represent! Small groups of children in a classroom are like your committees – they represent far less stress and greater learning outcomes than when placed in large groups with one Speaker of the House! (Or singular teacher directing everyone's actions).

What are those fundamentals of high-quality care?

3.) Appropriate environments that resemble a home-like atmosphere where children are free to explore appropriate materials of their own interest – NOT THAT of a teacher. Everything that we know about the brain development of young children stresses the importance of authentic learning experiences (John Dewey – a famous Vermonter and champion of our educational systems). So much of what Dewey espoused focused on engaging children in settings where they could question things around them – and challenge theories and experience the great outdoors EVERY DAY. These are the environments that include natural elements, furniture that mirrors what they have at home and a safe outdoor space where they can feel the grass, splash in puddles and wallow in dirt and mud – all of those things that most of us growing up around family farms enjoyed on a daily basis.

Environments that limit the number of transitions children experience and thus offer less stress to the child: Think about the number of transitions a kiddo has when 1 – gets up 2 –dressed 3-eats 4- gets in the car 5- goes to school – gets out of the car 6 – enters school/classroom 7- meets teacher/friends.

If the morning is short such as a public PreK – add another 7 to those transitions when a child goes home or to another provider: TOOO MUCH STRESS!!

Children learn best when they are given real-life roles and responsibilities - THEN HELD ACCOUNTABLE – to appropriate consequences for their actions and that takes TIME.

All of our 3-year-olds clear their plates and put dishes/compost/trash away for themselves, cut open those darned string cheese packets and GOgurt pouches, put on their own shoes, help others zip their coats and how to sweep up when they tracked in mud YET – their parents are gob smacked that these kiddos are so self-sufficient at school – yet so helpless at home. It is because they must act for themselves at school and there is constant verbal/physical cueing and support that happens throughout an 11.5 hour day.

Quality environments must also feature unlimited access to nature- where children can take that colored water from the bowl where they just mixed blue and yellow to make green – and pour it on the white snow to see if it stays green!

We are living in a more culturally diverse state than when I was in school literally just around the corner. One of the greatest ways to diminish cultural bias is to get young children outside: RUN! JUMP!! PLAY!! Translates to every language – and you don't need words to convey what to do next.

What are those fundamentals of high-quality care?

4.) Building Relationships with families is at the core of all early care and education. These relationships take years to build: the strength of trust established with parents in the early years is what makes for a successful relationship during the elementary and secondary school experiences. When this bonding happens, children are more apt to receive early interventions, food programs, transportation and assistance with finding medical/dental homes. A school setting might work well for a family who only wants 10 hours per week of pre-K.

Our teachers work very hard to promote a sense of belonging that will continue long after children have left our programs. We have over seven different family events each year where families share their cultural attributes from all over the world with one another. Through music, art, food and fun we build a much larger community of learners. These families come from a broad geographic region of our state since they all work for the same employer. AND the one thing they all share is the love of children and the desire to do what is right for each child.

All of our 5-STAR, (state's quality assurance rating for early care and education), nationally accredited programs offer a broader range of services for approximately 49 weeks per year –(longer periods of time than public schools offering 10 hours per week of pre-K for 35 weeks per year). Additionally, the directors and lead teachers of our programs are specifically trained in early childhood development hold teaching licenses from the Vermont Agency of Education with endorsements in Early Education and some with Elementary Education as well.

At the end of the day... we are all here to improve the lives of young children – not just get them ready for kindergarten. Parents should have the ability to choose options that best meet their needs and the needs of their children – just as they always have – through a mixed delivery system of services available throughout Vermont. For that small number of families who can make part-day, part-year preschool work for their children, the free public school system is their answer. To those working families who need 8-11 hours of early care and education — the private programs operated by the YMCA and so many others are the **infrastructure that keeps Vermont and Vermonters working**. We must do everything we can to protect the successful services they provide children and families.

I know it is very easy for you all to get lost in the myriad of data and faces coming at you each day. I will leave each of you with my card so you can give me a call and come by to **see for yourselves** what a high-quality early care and education setting truly looks like **and how it feels to** spend two hours a morning or 11.5 hours a day with people who love you and are doing every single thing they can to help you grow.

