

Testimony for the Senate Education Committee
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Good afternoon. Thank you for taking the time to hear my testimony. My name is Colleen Christman. I am a 5 Star registered home childcare provider in South Burlington. I'd like to first talk to you about my program and it's operation, and then share with you some experiences of other providers in the state.

My program has been in operation for 7 years and for the past 4 years, I have been a PreK partner, first through Act 62, and now with Act 166. My current enrollment includes 8 part-time children from 5 different families, ages ranging from 2 to 6 years (I have 5 qualifying PreK students from 2 different towns). Since I've opened my program, I have cared for children ages 3 months to 12 years from families with various backgrounds, family cultures and life circumstances including: families from LUND, children in DCF custody, a homeless family, children with developmental delays, families receiving tuition assistance through the Child Care Financial Assistance Program, working families, as well as families who are both new and old to the area. My longest enrolled family has been with me for 6 years, and I have been able to share the excitement as families welcome additional siblings. Many of the families in my care feel like extended family.

My program is somewhat unique to other home child care programs in the area, in that I am open only 3 days per week. I offer AM, PM and full day options within my 8am-5pm schedule. I am lucky to have a separate space in my home dedicated to my program where children have the freedom to explore. No day is ever the same, but there are many things that remain consistent:

The children experience long, uninterrupted time to PLAY both inside and outside. My role as a teacher is to provide an environment that enhances the child's natural curiosity and interest level. Research has shown that play is a very important part of a developmentally appropriate child care program. I operate with the understanding that learning happens *all the time*, and it happens *naturally*. Play = Living = Learning, and I use these three terms interchangeably. I tell prospective families that if they are expecting worksheets and uniform crafts brought home, they will be sadly disappointed. Throughout my day, I observe and document children's play. I'll demonstrate this with a favorite experience:

Filling buckets and digging in the dirt (extra bonus for finding worms!)-- This experience develops gross and fine motor skills, regulation of emotions and behaviors, math skills such as comparing and measuring, knowledge of patterns and number concepts, cognitive skills such as: persistence, curiosity, comparing and contrasting, awareness of expectations, independence. Inevitably someone will find a worm and feed it to one of my chickens... and the learning and developing continues.

Children in my program are encouraged to work out their social and cognitive struggles on their own-- or better yet, with a friend. They are treated and spoken to like competent humans. They are expected to grow at their own *individual* pace. They contribute to and are part of a supportive community and through this, they develop empathy, self confidence, independence and INTERdependence and self-worth.

My work extends beyond my program and I continuously wear several hats, within my program-- managing my business, being preK teacher and child care provider, and also within my personal life and community as well. I am mother to 2 young children (ages 4 and 7), whom we homeschool. I am the co-leader of a local Starting Points Provider Network group-- a state-wide, provider-run support network for childcare providers. I also support local families through my work as the South Burlington Family Center coordinator (part of Building Bright Futures Direct Services)-- I organize playgroups and other events for the community. I further connect with the community by leading parent and provider education workshops as a Northern Lights Instructor. As you can see, my passion truly lies in education and connecting people to resources and information.

Throughout my various networks I have had the opportunity to chat with many other providers and the diversity between program operations is very interesting. With the PreK funding, I am able to maintain a part-time schedule while accommodating families with various schedule needs. During the 2015-16 school year, over 30% of the tuition my program received came from Act166 funding. This school year, I am anticipating 50% of tuition to come from PreK funding. This funding has been a huge benefit to my families. Several of my PreK students attend 10 hrs/ week at no cost to their families. I have another child who is able to attend 3 full days instead of 2 because he receives PreK funding. In order to limit expenses and increase program income, I apply for several grants each year to fund materials. I participate in the food program to offset my food costs. On average, I gross about \$30,000 with program expenses averaging around \$5,000.

I am part of an increasingly fewer number of home child care programs in my area that offer flexible part-time care. In order to maintain a consistent budget, many home programs are only offering full-time care. Several providers in my network group live on single incomes and can not survive financially without this consistency. Other providers struggle to balance their financial needs with that of their childcare families'. There are providers in many parts of the state who do not charge co-pays to families on child care financial assistance. They and the families in their care are living paycheck to paycheck. Healthcare costs remain a challenge to many providers as well, especially those on single incomes or with self-employed partners. Some choose not to have health insurance as a result. In addition, sick time or family/medical leave is often unpaid time off. A provider in my network suffered a minor heart attack and got back to work as soon as possible due to finances. When I had my second son, I was thankfully able to put aside money and take 8 weeks unpaid, but I know other providers who have taken 1 week off after having a baby. The proposal to create a statewide family and medical leave insurance program would

help alleviate this strain. Providers and families would be able to take the time they need to welcome a new child or care for themselves or a family member who is suffering from a serious illness.

The biggest price I (and many others) pay to maintain a high quality program includes many hours of work outside my normal program schedule. Despite moving to a Mon-Wed schedule 2 years ago, my workload has remained similarly heavy (if not more due to the recent adoption of the new regulations.) During 2016, my program was open, on average approximately 25 hours per week. I estimate that I worked on average an additional 19 hours per week between network meetings, professional development, daily maintenance and prep, and paperwork (including accounting and invoicing, applications for STARS and grants, Food Program claims, child care registration renewal, and PreK paper work-- such as district partner applications and invoicing, maintaining student portfolios and my teaching license). The cost of this additional work adds up to a nearly \$9 per hour pay-cut. Being a high quality provider has meant working more without added compensation.

Although the pride of accomplishing all this while providing a nurturing environment for families (including my own) and still maintaining my sanity is priceless, I am hesitant to say the path to quality is through all this extra work. I know other quality providers (some with 1 or 2 Stars, some with no Stars) who choose to direct their focus to their program and the children and families enrolled. Their education levels vary from high school diplomas to higher education degrees. Many of them have been in business for 10-20 years and are well connected to the early childhood community. I know one provider who just gave up her NAFCC accreditation because it was not worth the extra work and expense. She chooses instead to support current and prospective providers as a mentor, early childhood instructor and advocate. She has played a key part in helping to support New American women maneuver the childcare and early childhood system so they can open their own childcare programs.

In conclusion, there is a lot of work to be done to support child care providers and the families in their care. Despite this, I continue to see the benefits child care providers such as myself provide to the community. The child in my program with speech and developmental delays made major gains after I connected their family to EEE services. One father recently thanked me for connecting his wife to the local community. Having their children in my program has helped his wife develop the confidence to leave their children in the care of someone else. As a result, her emotional health has increased and she also has the time to help more with their family business. It's families like these that inspire me to do more to develop my program, connect to the community and support other providers. I hope my testimony may inspire you to do the same in helping to support the early childhood community.