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To: House Committee on Commerce & Economic Development

From: Dr. Caitlin McLean, Workforce Research Specialist, Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California-Berkeley

### **Testimony on Investing in Vermont's Early Care & Education Workforce**

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Dr. Caitlin McLean, Workforce Research Specialist at the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, at the University of California-Berkeley. Our research center at UC-Berkeley has studied issues central to the preparation, support, and compensation of early childhood educators across the nation for just over 20 years.

The early childhood educator workforce is the workforce all others depend on. Without ensuring that early educators are adequately prepared, supported on the job, and compensated fairly for their work, it will be impossible to build the supply of services that children need during a key stage of their development,<sup>1</sup> that parents rely on to be successful at work, and that employers depend on for a reliable, sustainable workforce, across industries.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, currently, teaching in early care and education is one of the lowest paid occupations.<sup>3</sup> More than 1 in 10 early childhood educators (10.9%) in Vermont live in poverty — a rate that is almost 14 times as high as for other teachers (0.8%).<sup>4</sup> Early childhood educators in Vermont, **with a bachelor's degree**, are paid 17% less than their colleagues in the K–8 system.<sup>5</sup> As a result of these poverty-level wages, we know that nationally, more than one-half (53%) of those working in child care, and their families, must rely on public assistance programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, Medicaid, and food stamps just to get by.<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, it is difficult for early care and education providers to find and keep qualified staff.<sup>7</sup> Surveys of early childhood educators across states consistently find that low compensation is a key driver of poor retention and turnover.<sup>8</sup>

Despite low early educator pay, care is still unaffordable for many families.<sup>9</sup> Full-time infant care costs, per child, an average of \$12,507 per year in Vermont and takes up 18% of a typical family's income, far higher than the 7% recommended by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.<sup>10</sup> States have historically spent less per child for children before they enter their school years than for children in K–12 classrooms, even though services for younger children require more teachers, and families typically need these services for longer hours and more days of the year.<sup>11</sup>

Vermont stands to benefit from making a serious public investment in early care and education services and in early educators in particular:

- Funding scholarship programs, such as the nationally renowned T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood program, helps prepare current and future early childhood educators, while avoiding crushing student loan debt that can drive educators out of the field. With such low wages currently, national recommendations are clear that early childhood educators should not be expected to shoulder the costs of training and qualifications that are necessary to develop specific knowledge and skills to facilitate learning among classes of small children.<sup>12</sup> The T.E.A.C.H. program has demonstrated success in approximately half the states in the nation by supporting early educators, even those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to achieve higher education and improve their practice with young children.<sup>13</sup>
- Ensuring sufficient public funding for providers to increase the wages of early educators, in line with their educational attainment and experience, is critical to ensure educators are attracted to this work now and in the future. States like Alabama and several cities have been leading the way, ensuring that early educators in publicly funded pre-K classrooms are paid on par with K-3 teachers, even when they work in community-based settings rather than schools.<sup>14</sup> Yet much more must be done to ensure appropriate compensation for educators in *all* early care and education classrooms, regardless of the age of the child or the setting. Efforts in New York City have been moving in this direction, funding wage increases to early educators in Head Start programs and community-based centers via contracts with providers.<sup>15</sup> Such initiatives to increase wages for early educators across settings can take time to fully implement, so some states have invested in a wage supplement program — such as the WAGES\$ stipend program in North Carolina or the School Readiness Tax Credit in Louisiana, as a short-term measure to stem the staffing crisis by providing immediate financial relief to early educators who are struggling on low wages.<sup>16</sup>
- Ultimately, increasing public investment in both early educators and the wider early care and education system will have several positive effects:
  - Reducing the cost burden on parents, removing barriers to work, and benefiting employers via reduced absenteeism and turnover;
  - Providing children with a solid early childhood foundation and setting them on the path for success in education and employment in later life;
  - And last, but certainly not least, ensuring that teaching in early childhood offers a pathway to the middle class rather than to poverty, so that current and future educators will see working with the youngest children as a viable career path.<sup>17</sup>

Thank you very much for your attention to this critical issue, and the work you all are doing to support children, families, and early childhood educators in Vermont.

## References

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- <sup>2</sup> Bishop-Josef, S, C. Beakey, S. Watson, and Tom Garrett. (2019) [\*Want to Grow the Economy? Fix the Child Care Crisis: Workers and Employers Feel Pain in Pocketbooks and Productivity\*](#). Washington D.C.: Council for a Strong America.
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- <sup>5</sup> Gould et al. 2020.
- <sup>6</sup> For reference, only 21% of the broader U.S. workforce participates in one or more of these programs, see Whitebook et al., 2018.
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- <sup>9</sup> Center for the Study of Child Care Employment and Child Care Aware of America. (2018). [\*Why Do Parents Spend So Much On Child Care, Yet Early Childhood Educators Earn So Little?\*](#) Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley and Arlington, VA: Child Care Aware of America.
- <sup>10</sup> Early care and education for four-year-olds in Vermont costs \$11,438, annually, per child see Gould et al., 2020.
- <sup>11</sup> Gould et al., 2020.
- <sup>12</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) (2018). [\*Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education\*](#). Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; McLean, C. and Copeman Petig, A. (2019). [\*Supporting a Diverse, Qualified Early Educator Workforce: Aligning Policy with Research and Realities\*](#). Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.
- <sup>13</sup> [T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood National Center](#) website.
- <sup>14</sup> McLean, C., Dichter, H., & Whitebook, M. (2017). [\*Strategies in Pursuit of Pre-K Teacher Compensation Parity: Lessons From Seven States and Cities\*](#). Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley and New Brunswick, NJ: the National Institute for Early Education Research.

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<sup>15</sup> Veiga, C. (2019). "[City, labor leaders announce deal to close pay gaps for NYC pre-K teachers in Head Start programs.](#)" *Chalkbeat*.

<sup>16</sup> McLean, C., Whitebook, M., Roh, E. (2019). *[From Unlivable Wages to Just Pay for Early Educators.](#)* Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>17</sup> Gould et al., 2020.