

Good Afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to speak to your committee today about the challenges Vermont's early childhood education workforce faces and the supports we are asking for. My name is Sonja Raymond and I am the Executive Director for the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children and the owner of Apple Tree Learning Centers in Stowe.

As the owner of an early care and education program for the last 20 years, I can tell you that this business is like no other. We are basically a business providing a social service for our communities. High-quality early care and education literally builds the brains of our youngest Vermonters, creating the workforce of the future. Early childhood is a time of tremendous opportunity for setting a strong foundation for everything to come. At the same time, most Vermont parents can't work without child care – so we're the backbone of today's workforce. And we know we have a crisis in this field, both in terms of the number of available child care slots and in terms of the early educators caring for those kids.

- The median annual wage for a child care worker in our state is less than half of the median annual wage for a kindergarten teacher. This makes it very difficult to retain our most qualified staff, particularly those working in preschool-age classrooms. With the median salaries, often without important benefits such as healthcare, for early childhood educators so low, early care and education programs struggle to retain all of their teachers and assistants.
- Teachers and assistants currently working in the early care and education field who want or need to further their education often cannot afford to without the assistance of a scholarship program. Because teacher wages are so low and programs cannot charge enough money to cover their true costs, early educators are left with very few options for advancing their education. They simply cannot afford to incur any debt.
- Programs cannot charge families higher tuition rates, which would be needed in order to increase teacher wages. Therefore, early childhood educators have some of the highest turnover rates in the state each year.
- Vermont has seen many programs close their doors or downsize their programs because they cannot find and retain well qualified staff. Trying to hire qualified staff is close to impossible, often taking 6-8 months if at all. Often these teachers come with student loans to pay off and cannot afford to take the job due to low pay or leave after a short time for the same reason.

Research shows that the #1 factor in determining the quality of a program is the quality of their teachers. Investing in the early childhood workforce is critical now. There are professional development supports that exist, but they are seriously underfunded and solid investment in compensation must be addressed. This is an investment in our state and local economic infrastructure: lack of child care is a barrier to businesses and workforce development; and lack of professional development is a barrier to a strong child care industry and slots for those who need childcare. I ask that you target your investments in the following areas:

- T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship Program:
  - Vermont's T.E.A.C.H. scholarship program is based on a national, data-drive and outcomes-focused model.
  - The goal of TEACH is to provide debt-free higher education to those currently working in the early care and learning field through:

- Comprehensive scholarships that cover the costs of college coursework, books, travel, time each week during the workday to complete coursework, Support from TEACH staff to help participants navigate balancing work, school, and family needs;
- Annual educational attainment goals ensuring that participants stay on track in completing their target credential and an annual bonus through T.E.A.C.H. and their employer.

This program currently serves 76 early educators:

- **25** teachers who are in the Vermont Childcare Apprenticeship Program funded by the Child Development Division (\$204,000)
- **38** teachers working to attain an AA, and **13** teachers working to attain a teaching license in early childhood funded by \$300,000 of one-time funding that the legislature awarded last year.

This is **44** fewer early educators than 1 year ago. We are asking for funding that will sustain previous year's numbers (**50 Apprentices, 50 AA, 20 Licensure**) and to expand to include a bachelors scholarship for 25 people. The total amount needed is **\$653,000**.

For teachers in the workforce, including those in my program, the T.E.A.C.H. Scholarship Program has been an incredible resource. It not only allows them to attain an Apprenticeship certificate or an Associate's degree in a way that is affordable, but they are well supported by their employer to have time out of the classroom to work on coursework each week which is essential given that most of my teachers have families at home and work 40-50 hours each week. This support has allowed them to be successful.

#### **Student loan repayment support:**

Establish a loan repayment support program to help new early childhood educators balance low wages with meeting their financial obligations to pay back student loans used to obtain their bachelor's degree. Given the low wages that early educators make, it is nearly impossible for early educators that have recently graduated with a bachelor's degree to be able to make their loan payments and afford other living expenses such as rent, car payments, food, etc. All too often these early educators have to leave their program and seek employment elsewhere. A loan repayment program would ease the burden of educational loan payments so that they would be able to better manage their everyday expenses and remain working in early education programs. Given the shortage of highly qualified educators, particularly licensed teachers for pre-k, this type of support would be an excellent recruitment and retainment tool.

#### **Temporary Wage Support Program:**

Establish a temporary wage support program for early educators working at regulated child care and early education programs to address the wage gap Vermont's early educators face. These wage supports would be based on a teacher's educational level and work experience. States that have implemented such programs have seen their average annual turnover rate for early childhood educators drop to 11%. Such programs have proven to be a critical resource in retaining early childhood educators while broader work, including increasing CCFAP reimbursement rates, is undertaken to

address the root causes of low wages. This would be a great first step in truly addressing the stifling compensation issues.