

I think we can all agree that early education programs are essential, not only for our economy but for the families and children that we serve. This has always been the case as is the fact that early education has always been wofefully underfunded.

When this 2020 legislative session began in January, I came and testified about the critical need to support:

1. Funding to maintain and expand scholarship programs
2. Establishment of a loan repayment program for early educators
3. Establishment of a wage supplement program- including health care

In the 8 months since the session began, our needs for the ECE workforce have not changed, in fact they have only intensified through COVID. Staff retention issues, dismally low wages, lack of health care and an underqualified workforce continue to be serious problems significantly impact the quality, affordability, and access of early childhood programs. There are fewer early education programs available now than in January. Many early childhood program have lost staff and are unable to hire qualified staff forcing them to decrease their capacity. As of October 2020, will no longer be T.E.A.C.H. scholarship funds for the 75 educators who are currently working toward their AA and teaching license needed for positions they hold or are looking to fill.

The newly released 2020 BBF Early Childhood Needs Assessment highlighted the dire situation faced by programs trying to hire staff. Of those programs surveyed:

- 87% said a lack of qualified candidates was a factor
- 91% reported the inability to pay enough was a factor
- 52% reported inability to provide benefits was a factor

When asked about factors preventing staff from participating in professional development

- 78% respondents reported professional development being too expensive as a factor preventing them from participating in professional development
- 69% respondents reported a lack of sufficient staffing to cover when they are absent for professional development

The Early Childhood Education workforce rose to the challenge during COVID, stepping in to support children of essential workers and then reopening for all children in June. They nimbly and safely responded to support wellness for all children and families, demonstrating the critical role they play in a healthy VT infrastructure and economy. A well prepared, well compensated ECE workforce is essential to both health and economic prosperity.

We ask that you support scholarships for early childhood educators who need and/or desire to increase their qualifications. For those who have already accrued related educational expenses, paying back their student loans is a barrier to employment in the field with wages at their current levels. A wage supplement program will allow those who desire to work in the field to do so. Even before a long-term solution is in place, Vermont needs to invest in this essential workforce.

In the short-term, please Direct CRF funds for health insurance premium support during the pandemic, and for bonuses for hiring and retention. And support scholarships to help early educators receive the basic degrees and credentials they need to do this work and build capacity in the system.