

My name is Sarah Costa. Until last summer, I was the Executive Director of the Aldrich Public Library in Barre. It was a job I was good at and enjoyed, where I could daily have a positive impact on my community. Then, this baby was born, and I left that career — in part because of challenges finding reliable childcare. Now I'm here on behalf of let's grow kids and the Vermont main street alliance to advocate for fully finding h.194 and h.107. I've lived in three different counties in our state, and in each one, finding child care is a nightmare that each parent feels they face alone.

Imagine for a moment that there were no public schools in our state. What would that look like? Parents would look to private schools, which would need to charge tuition that could cover infrastructure, salaries, and materials. Parents who could not afford to pay that price might cobble together something informal whose quality, safety, or educational value may be lacking. Or, they may need to choose between jobs and children right in the prime of their working years. It would strangle our economy. If public schools didn't exist, we would need to invent them! And yet, this is precisely the situation faced by any Vermont parent of a child under 6. I do not suggest that we should have public daycares, but I do want us to recognize that public schooling only works thanks to the societal investment we make in it in the form of tax support. The economics of early care are no different, nor is it any less important in the development of the child.

I currently live in Burlington with my four year old son, eight month old daughter, and husband. Here, our prospects are the best of anywhere I've lived in this state for finding care: only 77% of Chittenden County infants likely to need care don't have access to high quality programs. That's better than the 89% and 92% in the other two counties I lived in when my son was a baby. Everywhere I've been in Vermont, parents are struggling to find nonexistent or unaffordable care, providers are struggling to stay in business without charging prohibitive rates, and children are suffering.

At the library I ran, we hosted former Governor James Douglas for a talk one evening. Someone asked him what he thought the greatest challenge is in Vermont's immediate future. He was unequivocal: demographics. It's the aging population, empty schools, and the shrinking workforce supporting both. If we want Vermont to be a place where parents can work to create a strong economy while raising the children who are the future of our state, we must invest in childcare. That's why I'm asking you to fully fund both h.194 and h.107. Investing in early care and paid family leave is critical to attracting and retaining a strong workforce. This should be the best state in which to live, work, and raise a family. These two bills are a step toward finally realizing that potential. Thank you for your time.