

Date: Wednesday, February 19, 2020

To: House Committee on Appropriations

From: Sonja Raymond, Executive Director, Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children

Testimony on Vermont's Early Childhood Education Workforce

Good morning. 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. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to your committee today about the challenges faced by Vermont's early childhood education workforce and ways that Vermont can better support this critical workforce.

We have a crisis in the early care and education field, both in terms of the lack of available child care and the lack of early educators to caring for and educate our youngest children. And without early childhood educators to staff programs, families cannot work and Vermont employers continue to struggle to fill vacant positions. However, early childhood educators in Vermont face numerous challenges.

- The median annual wage for a child care worker in our state is about \$30,000 less than 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 who can easily transition to a kindergarten classroom.
- Early childhood educators 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 wages are so low and programs cannot charge enough money to cover their costs, early educators are left with very few options for advancing their education.
- Vermont has seen many programs close their doors or downsize 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, when a program does find a teacher, they come with student loans to pay off and leave after a short time because they literally cannot afford to stay.

Lack of child care is a barrier to businesses and workforce development; and the only way that we can increase access to child care is by investing in our early care and education workforce. I ask that you target your investments to expand Vermont's T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood scholarship program, establish a student loan repayment support program, and create a temporary wage support program to address current pay disparities between the early care and education field and other education positions.

T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship Program:

- Vermont's T.E.A.C.H. scholarship program is based on a national, evidence-based, 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 by covering the costs of

- tuition, books, travel, time each week during the workday to complete coursework; and mentoring support from TEACH staff to help participants navigate balancing work, school, and family needs;

This program currently serves 76 early educators:

This is **44** fewer early educators than the program supported in fiscal year 2019, due to decreased funding for fiscal year 2020. In order to expand support to fiscal year 2019 levels and expand to include a desperately needed scholarship program for those seeking bachelor's degrees, **T.E.A.C.H. needs an appropriation of \$653,000.**

Student loan repayment support:

In addition to needing supports for those currently working in the early care and education field, we also need to recruit and retain new early educators. A tool that has been helpful in other workforce sectors is student loan repayment support. 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. **\$1.6 million is needed to establish a student loan repayment support program in Vermont.**

Temporary Wage Support Program:

Finally, we're requesting an appropriation of \$12.3 million to fund a temporary wage supplement program for early childhood educators. This approach has been successfully implemented in other states to support existing early educators and sustain new early educators is a temporary wage support program, driving down turnover rates to an average of 11% (currently, early childhood educators have one of the highest turnover rates in Vermont), help to address pay parity gaps, and lead to long-term increased educational attainment for early educators. This would be a great first step in addressing the compensation issues.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration of these issues.