

Good Morning. Thank you for inviting me to speak to your committee today about the challenges that the Early Education Workforce and childcare business owners are facing. My name is Sonja Raymond and I am the owner of Apple Tree Learning Centers in Stowe and the Executive Director for the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children.

As the owner of an early care and education program for the last 19 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 education literally builds the brains of our youngest Vermonters, creating the workforce of the future. Between birth and age five, children are forming a million new neural connections every second. It's 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 some kind of regulated 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 for working families, and in terms of the early educators caring for those kids.

My program, Apple Tree Learning Centers is a 5 STAR, NAEYC Accredited program, Public Preschool Partner serving infants-school age. Per licensing our assistants must have a minimum of a Child Development Associate Certificate and our teachers need a minimum of 21 early childhood credits. Our NAEYC Accreditation requires us to have lead teachers who have a minimum of an AA and our Public Preschool partnership requires that our preschool teachers have BA with their teaching license. Of our 22 teachers and assistants, 8 have the BA and 2 of those have the teaching license, 6 have their AA with 2 of those working toward their BA, and the remaining 8 have a minimum of a CDA.

Given all of these positive qualities, we still face serious challenges that threaten our very existence:

- Our teachers are paid on average 40% less than their counterparts with similar credentials and experience in the public school. This makes it very difficult to retain our most qualified staff, particularly those in our preschools. With the median statewide salary for a teacher in an early care and education program at \$12.71 an hour often without important benefits such as healthcare, all programs struggle to retain all of their teachers and assistants.
- In my role at VTAEYC, I have the opportunity to talk to a lot of high-quality child care providers all around the state. The number one concern I hear from them is the difficulty of recruiting and retaining qualified staff.
- Teachers and assistants who want or need to further their education can not afford to do so without the assistance of a scholarship program. Because teacher wages are so low and programs can not charge enough money to cover their true costs, early educators are left with very few options for increasing their educational and credential requirements. They simply can not afford to incur any debt.
- We can not charge our families what we should be able to pay our staff what they need to be paid. Tuition at our center ranges from \$57-\$61 per day depending on the age group. The rates are on par with other center-based programs in our area, with the exception of one that charges far more. Families are currently paying an average of 23-40 percent of their household income on tuition.

- Vermont has seen many programs close their doors or downsize their programs because they can not find and retain well qualified staff. Programs can not afford to pay for their staff to take college classes and the teachers can not afford to pay for them either. 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 can not 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. Scholarship Program:

Assists teachers currently in the workforce in paying for college coursework, books, travel, time each week during the workday to complete coursework, and an annual bonus through T.E.A.C.H. and their employer. This program serves 70 teachers who are in the Vermont Childcare Apprenticeship Program, 50 teachers working to attain an AA, and 20 teachers working to attain a teaching license in early childhood. This is a program currently supported by the Child Development Division through June 30, 2018. We need \$550,000.00 in FY 20 just to sustain the current numbers of scholarships.

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.

The Vermont Child Care Apprenticeship certificate model for T.E.A.C.H. has added support as many of the teachers in this program are newer to the field or have never taken college classes before. As required by the Dept. of Labor, these teachers have on the job mentors coaching them and helping to assess specific skill development. These supports have proven to be very successful.

- Loan repayment:

We need to establish a loan repayment program for new early educators working as a lead teachers. This would assist teachers in early childhood programs that have incurred student debt prior to entering the workforce in paying down their debt in a way that was financially sustainable. In order to truly be successful in building capacity for child care programs, we need more lead teachers, which requires a bachelors degree, so we would like to expand the program in FY20 to include bachelors degrees. This requires additional investment.

- Tax Credits:

Establish refundable tax credits to address the early educator wage gap. This annual tax credit would be based on a teachers educational level and work experience. This would be a great first step in truly addressing the stifling compensation issues.

- Establish refundable tax credits for businesses who support their employees with child care. This would help engage employers in being part of the solution, and it would also benefit existing child care businesses. Although most of us are unable to provide many benefits, most of us do offer a discount on child care for our employees. Providing a refundable tax credit for us could enable more of us to expand either pay or benefits for our employees.