

Good Afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to speak to your committee today about the current and desired state of workforce development in early childhood. My name is Sonja Raymond and I am the Executive Director for the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children, an organization representing over 300 early education programs and also the owner of Apple Tree Learning Centers, which serves 120 children with a staff of 24 in Stowe.

I want to share more information with you about Vermont's early education workforce crisis and the need for a significant investment to sustain and grow this critical field.

The current state of the workforce:

In a nutshell, the Early Education workforce is facing a crisis. In my role at VTAEYC, I have the opportunity to talk to a lot of early education programs all around the state. The number one concern I hear from them is the difficulty of recruiting and retaining qualified staff. 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 cannot afford to take the job due to low pay or they leave after a short time for the same reason.

Vermont early childhood program licensing requires center-based assistants to have a minimum of a Child Development Associate Certificate (equivalent to 12 college credits). A teacher associate needs a minimum of 21 college credits and a teacher needs a bachelor's degree. The Public Preschool partnership requires that our preschool teachers have a BA with their teaching license. Unfortunately, there are not enough qualified staff in programs currently and there are very few to hire.

Teachers and assistants currently in the workforce who want or need to further their education can not afford to without the assistance of a scholarship program. Because teacher wages are so low and programs can not charge enough tuition 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.

The resources that support teachers in attaining college credit are limited and will be severely underfunded heading into FY20. There are only two resources that currently exist to help teachers attain necessary degrees and credentials: T.E.A.C.H. Vermont and a one-time tuition grant pool.

- T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship Program:
 - Vermont's T.E.A.C.H. scholarship program is based on a national, data-driven 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 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.

- **One-time Grant Pool:**

This pool of funds is designed to support teachers who need to take college credit, but do not qualify for PELL or VSAC grants. A teacher may apply for a maximum of \$1,000.00 per semester. Currently, the Child Development Division supports \$50,000 of tuition scholarships per year.

Total State investment for FY20 is \$204,550, less than half of the \$750,000 that is needed to maintain the current level of support. Without additional state funding for FY20 and moving forward, the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship Program will need to cut the number of teachers it serves by 2/3.

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.

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.

The desired state of the workforce:

A system that supports those currently in the early childhood workforce (teacher assistant, associate teacher and teacher) to attain the necessary credentials and degrees and those entering the workforce with degrees to afford to work in early childhood programs rather than move to other sectors that pay higher wages and offer greater benefits.

- A well funded T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship Program

Currently T.E.A.C.H. is supported by the Child Development Division through June 30, 2018. After July 1st the Child Development Division will only have \$204,500 to invest in the program. We need an additional \$550,000.00 in FY 20 just to sustain the current numbers of scholarships. 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. The cost of a fully expanded program that parallels the Early Childhood Career Ladder is \$1.2 million.

- Student loan repayment support:

As I mentioned earlier, it can be hard for new early educators to stay in the field due to low wages and high student loan debt. Vermont and other states have addressed this issue in other field through student loan repayment support programs. We need to establish a student loan repayment support program for new early educators working as lead teachers in child care and early learning programs. It can be hard for new early educators to remain in the field due to low wages and high student loan debt. This program 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 is financially sustainable. An estimated cost is between \$500,00-\$2,000,000.

- Tax Credits:

As other states have struggled to address the wage gap that exists between early educators and their peers in other fields, they have piloted offering refundable tax credits that are based on an early educator's education and experience. Implementing such a program in Vermont would be a great first step in truly addressing the stifling compensation issues.

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.

The time for significant investment in the workforce is now. The T.E.A.C.H. Program needs between \$550,000 and 1.2 million. The Loan Repayment program as referenced in H194 and H349 requires between \$500,000 and 2 million. Estimates for Childcare tax credits are currently being figured by the Child Development Division.

Thank you for you time.