

Wednesday, April 10, 2019

Testimony from Christina Goodwin, Executive Director of Pine Forest Children's Center
Re: H.531

Thank you for inviting me today to testify on H.531. As an early childhood educator and parent of young children, I am asking you to support this important bill to better support families and early care and learning providers in our state.

I have been a teacher, an Assistant Director and now the Executive Director at Pine Forest Children's Center in Burlington for the last 15 years. As a non-profit early childhood program, Pine Forest Children's Center strives to create a diverse learning community for all families where all children can learn and grow. The key components of H.531 could have a positive impact on our program's families, teachers, and community.

H.531 proposes funding two critical supports for the early education workforce - a student loan repayment support program and scholarships for early educators currently working in the early care and learning field. As a lifelong Vermonter, I attended UVM, earning my degree in Early Childhood Education and Human Development & Family Studies. After graduating, I then struggled to pay back my student loans due to low wages in the early care and learning field. I have stuck it out as it is my passion and my mission to make early childhood education accessible to all children in Vermont. In addition to struggling, personally, to make ends meet by working in this field, it is a challenge that I experience as an Executive Director. Recently, hiring has been a challenge due to increased skill and education requirements as well as a low unemployment rate. Over the last several years, the Pine Forest staff have focused on supporting each other, growing professionally, and welcoming new teachers to the field. We have several young professionals on staff who would benefit from, and be more likely to remain in the field, if there was support to help them pay back their student loans. After all, the goal statewide is to bring in and retain young professionals, and this is the perfect way to incentivize current and future teachers to join the early childhood education field.

We have teachers in our community who are interested in continuing their education degrees or starting a degree program relative to the field. As mentioned, often teachers in early childhood are not adequately paid which can limit their ability to continue schooling. The workforce scholarship program would support teachers in moving up the career ladder in order to increase their wages and provide continued care to Vermont's children. This would also scaffold teachers in continuing to pursue their interests in order to be the future leaders of the field.

Statewide there are hundreds of early childhood educators who are working hard each day to scaffold young children's learning, support families, and grow as professionals. These dedicated educators often have lower paying positions with high responsibility roles. S.90, a bill sponsored by many of you proposed the promising practice of establishing refundable tax credits for early educators to begin to address the wage gap faced by those in our field. While this proposal was not moved forward as part of H.531, it is important to note that it will take more work - in addition to H.531's proposals of student loan repayment support and scholarships - to better support Vermont's early care and learning workforce.

In addition to being an early educator, I am also the parent of two children who have both benefited from being in a high-quality early childhood program. My oldest child just entered Kindergarten, and it is evident the experiences his early years of education have had on his future success. Like many of the families my program serves, my husband and I had to find ways to pay for child care while both remaining in the workforce. We have had to make sacrifices in order to do so, but we know our family and this state will reap the benefits in the long run. We feel fortunate that our children have grown up in a community of loving, caring, and dedicated teachers.

As a parent who has had to make hard decisions about how to pay for child care and as a program director, I fully support H.531's proposed changes to CCFAP. Too often when doing enrollment, I find that there are families who are on the bubble of qualification for financial assistance. This puts undue stress on families as they are forced to choose between working, finding quality care, and stretching their budget too thin. H.531's proposal to increase income eligibility and benefits available to families while encouraging families to work, would allow parents to access care that allows them to truly find a program that meets their family's needs and hopes for their child's education. I try to be a resource for families who discover they don't qualify for CCFAP, so that we can find creative ways to bring them into our program. As a program, this often puts us in a place where we have to make financial choices to support strengthening families while also taking away from other budget items. This issue was recently highlighted by the experience of one of our own teachers. Presently our community is trying to find a way to support a young family in remaining part of our program. The mother has been a teacher at Pine Forest for almost 7 years and recently with her partner welcomed a baby into their lives. The family recently found out that they do not qualify for CCFAP with the current guidelines as they are \$200 over the income eligibility cap for CCFAP. Without this assistance, in conjunction with an employee discount, they are facing decisions that no family should have to make; to both work and scrape by or to struggle to live on one salary. I want her child to be given the experience of high quality, community child care that he deserves. Adjustments to CCFAP would support this young family in being successful parents who are able to give their child a loving community to thrive in and allow them to continue on their professional paths. I do not want to lose a qualified, loving teacher as I know her and her child need this larger community.

Additionally, CCFAP's current reimbursement rates for preschool-age child care and afterschool child care are far behind what it actually costs our program to provide this care. This means that our program is put in the difficult position of having to either ask families to cover the difference between these reimbursement rates and our actual tuition or making up the difference elsewhere. H.531's proposal to align these reimbursement rates with the findings of the 2015 market rate survey will help to address this gap, but it still leaves room for improvement, as those rates will still be 4 years out of date. However, by increasing CCFAP eligibility, benefits, and reimbursement rates, it would allow Pine Forest to increase the number of CCFAP families we can support as we truly want to be a welcoming program for all families and create a diverse community.

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