

Good Morning. Thank you for inviting me to speak to your committee today about H531, as it relates specifically to scholarships and loan repayment. 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. I am also the owner of Apple Tree Learning Centers, in Stowe.

I want to share more information with you about Vermont's early education workforce crisis and the need for investment to sustain and grow this critical field, and why we support H. 531.

-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, these teachers come with student loans to pay off and have trouble taking 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.

We need 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.

The resources that support teachers in attaining college credit are limited and will be severely underfunded heading into FY20. There are only two scholarship 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, which began 5 years ago, is a successful scholarship program that provides debt-free higher education to those currently working in the early care and learning field.

This program is administered by VTAEYC and 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. Based on the high success rate of this scholarship program, it would be our intention at VTAEYC to apply for the program described in H. 531, if the bill passes.

- 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 per semester. Currently, the Child Development Division supports \$50,000 of tuition scholarships per year.

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 \$500,000 in FY 20 just to sustain the current numbers of scholarships.

- Student loan repayment support:

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 recruit and 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 recruit and retain their well qualified teachers because they have high student loan debt.

Vermont and other states have addressed this issue in other fields through student loan repayment support programs. H.531 establishes a badly needed student loan repayment support program for new early educators in child care and early learning programs. It can be hard for new early educators to enter and 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. It could also be a recruitment tool to attract recent graduates into the field and support them in paying back loans in the early years of their careers allowing them to remain in private programs.

-Research shows that the #1 factor in determining the quality of a child care program is the quality of its teachers. Investing in the early childhood workforce is critical now. That's why H. 531 is so important. There are professional development supports that exist, but they are seriously underfunded and solid investment in compensation must be addressed. H. 531 will make 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 hope that you will offer your full support of H. 531 as passed by the House.