

Thank you for the chance to talk with you about Vermont's Early Childhood Education workforce. My name is Joanna VonCulin, and I direct a Non-profit Center serving families in the Lamoille County area.

High quality education depends upon educated, experienced teachers. Yet I have a room in my center currently empty, not due to a lack of children, but because I haven't been able to find qualified teachers. Even before Covid-19, we've gone 6 months or more unable to fill a position.

Early education teachers are so poorly compensated that they don't earn enough to pay back existing student loans, and can't take on more. They often work full time, taking classes while caring for their own children, and relying on programs like 3SquaresVT to survive. Assistance that could suddenly end due to a minor pay raise, thanks to the benefits cliff. It is a precarious existence.

Achieving the necessary credentials rewards them with a career that doesn't pay enough to make ends meet. So they give up the work they love, moving to the k-12 system. There, with the same level of education, they literally double their income, get health insurance, respect, summers with their children, etc. We are constantly losing our best teachers.

To provide high quality early education that really makes a difference, Vermont must have a prepared and plentiful workforce. We must retain existing talent by compensating them with pay and benefits in parity with the school system. We need to entice top notch new students into the field. The Governor's budget makes important investments in the child care system, but we must go further to support Vermont's early childhood educators. Targeted student loan repayments and scholarships would be great places to start.

We need to recognize that this work isn't simply 'sitting babies', it is work that requires intelligence, skill, patience, ongoing education and a real passion for helping children and families.

Having that empty room without teachers impacts every family that calls and is told, again, that they are welcome to join a waitlist. Every time I say that, I am painfully aware that I've just told another person that they can't go to work until they can find quality care.

Thank you so much for supporting Vermont's young children, families, and crucial early educators.