

February 2022

Dear Vermont Legislative Representatives,

My name is Allison Gardner. I am a 38-year-old woman, I live in Colchester, Vermont with my family (husband and two boys, they are six (almost seven) and three).

For thirteen-and-a-half years I worked for Saint Michael's College, I left my position at the end of 2019. I now work full-time with my husband, I manage rental properties and work as a bookkeeper for the properties, a real estate company and development projects. Since my departure from Saint Michael's, I have returned and work part-time on special projects.

In 2020 both of my children were attending the Early Learning Center associated with Saint Michael's College. Two weeks prior to reopening on June 1, 2020, the college made the decision to close the center permanently. At the time of closure, the ELC had 40 students enrolled, with over 200 families on the waitlist. Within hours of learning the Center had been closed, staff and families gathered and got the wheels rolling on forming an independent nonprofit childcare center. This dedicated group of individuals was able to re-open the center September 1, 2020 and has remained open since.

The new Early Learning Center, Inc. has benefited greatly from the Federal CARES Act and other grants. Without these funds the Center would not have been able to re-open or continue to be operate.

As a parent I used to think the hardest part of childcare was finding a spot, but once you found a center you were good to go for the duration of your time needing a space for your first, second and possibly third child. I coasted along oblivious to the behind the scenes struggles of the childcare industry.

Now two full years into the COVID pandemic as a parent and as a board member of the ELC, Inc. I know how wrong I was. As a parent of a young, unvaccinated child I have experienced the struggles and challenges of this Omicron wave that has hit our state. My son was in school five days during a five-week timeline due to close contact exposures. He returned on a Monday, that evening I received a message his classroom would be closed the following day due to lack of staffing. This is in addition to half-days due to lack of staffing. I walk away from these situations, feeling at the end of my rope and I have the privilege of working for myself. I have deadlines to meet but I am not reporting to anyone. I feel deeply for parents who have hourly jobs or who work for companies. If I were still working for Saint Michael's full-time, I would have had to leave my job, this would not be sustainable.

During the extended closures, I often wondered what I was paying for. Tuition for my son to attend for five days a week is \$1,443.00 per month, equivalent to a mortgage. And during months when he is barely there, what am I paying for? I am paying for high quality educators, staff who care about my child and my family. Ninety percent of every tuition dollar collected goes towards salaries and benefits. Yet, we are paying our educators less than \$19/hour at the highest level. These are people who have been in this industry for over thirty years. And we cannot attract new educators because they can make more in the service sector. And this is where the challenge begins, we cannot pay educators a competitive salary, centers do not have enough educators to meet ratio, centers have to close classrooms, parents cannot continue to work from home with small children around if they are lucky to have that opportunity or call out from a job because they have no other choice, so parents must make a decision, is it worth it to continue to keep my child enrolled in a center and pay for the child to be there regardless of their attendance or leave my job Having a family should not mean leaving your job because of lack of childcare.

I have come a long way from thinking all I needed was a spot for my oldest child. It has become increasingly clear to me that we NEED to invest in this sector the way we do public education. Teachers need to make a live able salary; families need to know they can work and have a safe place to send their children and not go into debt the first few years of their child's life. Supporting the early childhood education workforce is CRITICAL to the success of our economy!

I ask you today to please support emergency supports for early childhood educators, like health insurance premium, free childcare, expanded loan repayment, and a recruitment campaign.

Thank you for your time. I sincerely hope Vermont does the right thing in supporting Early Childhood Education!

Sincerely,

Allison Gardner