

CIS testimony

Thank you for providing this opportunity for me to advocate for increasing the allocations in this year's state budget for Children's Integrated Services, which includes our early intervention system. I am Shelley Henson, a Hinesburg resident and the Early Education Director for CVSD servicing the towns of Hinesburg, Charlotte, Shelburne, Williston and St George. I also serve on the board of directors for Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children, an affiliate of the national organization. I have been in the field of early intervention and early education in Vermont for 34 years and I believe in the value of early intervention.

CIS' Early Intervention services support children with developmental delays from birth to age 3 AND their families with the goal to close that developmental gap as quickly as possible and often by kindergarten. This is a federally mandated program. Supporting children and families from birth to age three is a legal responsibility and the right thing for Vermont to do.

Children and families who are provided timely intervention seamlessly move through the continuum of support with some moving from receiving intervention to mediate a developmental delay to functioning in the typically developing category before age three. Others move fluidly to an Individual Education Program at age three through the child's local school district. In other words: early intervention works.

Through first hand experience as an early childhood special educator and district wide administrator, I see the current underfunding of CIS resulting in two things: 1. There is a continuous workforce turnover in our local CIS agency leading to inconsistent services and missed opportunities. And 2. Some children are not being provided services prior to their third birthday at a critical time in their lives, when brain development is at its peak. In January, our local agency told us they are understaffed by 4 developmental therapists. Underfunding means professionals are not compensated at a level that allows CIS to compete in a very tight workforce environment. Families who have asked for an assessment or been referred for assessment are on a waiting list. They are left without the support they need, are asking for and entitled to by law. Funding the work with young children and families is spending money when it matters the most. We need to fund CIS to the appropriate level to recruit and retain service providers.

Early intervention is hard work. From my personal work experience in transitioning students to part B, the public school system, I know the value of CIS. I see the early intervention providers celebrating children and families' successes when they are "no

longer potentially eligible.” I have seen the tears of concern in parents eyes when they sit at the table to transition to Part B and begin to talk about the new team and moving on from the early intervention CIS team. I see the CIS team reassuring and supporting this transition. The professional relationship and commitment between consistent CIS providers and families is critical to the education system in Vermont. Kindergarten students who arrive ready to learn with all the tools they need will become our next well prepared workforce.

Vermont must allocate the resources to match that value. Allocating the funds needed to shift the per member per month rate from \$600 to \$700 is what is needed, according to the state’s own assessment of the cost of services. We have an opportunity to strengthen families and reduce our long term costs. Please support all of our children by funding the system at the appropriate level.

In the Vermont Early Learning Standards this statement supports this allocation as well: “Each and every child benefits from a continuous and seamless sequence of educational and developmental supports throughout early childhood (birth through third grade) to maximize their full participation and diminish the challenges of transitions. This consistency is particularly important for young children who are most at risk.”

I also encourage you to allocate one time funding to improve the data system for early intervention/CIS. We have the opportunity to put our money where our mouths are in supporting the children and families in Vermont. Being able to track clients, skill development data and work efficiently is critical for service providers whose time is best spent with children and families and not working with ineffective systems. Goal number 4 of the Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan, states: The Early Childhood System Will Be Integrated, Well Resourced And Data-informed. This upgrade is needed to begin to meet this goal.

I am happy to answer further questions and can be reached through email at shenson@cvsdvt.org. I appreciate your time and thank you for the work you do to support all Vermont families.