

Quality early childhood education has always been essential to our economy, but in these very stressful times, access to early childhood education has become imperative, providing stability for the families they serve ensuring the healthy growth and development of our children.

When the pandemic hit, many people began to work from home but there was a portion of the population, our essential workers for whom that was not possible. Early childhood education programs stepped up and reopened their businesses to serve these families and it was Vermont's legislature that led the nation in supporting these programs until the state reopened.

It had never been more clear that an investment in early childhood education is not only key to Vermont's economic health but provides the very foundation necessary for young children to develop into well rounded, happy, productive members of our society.

As before the pandemic, the very existence of early education is in jeopardy. Families can not afford early education with some paying as much as 30% of their household income even with state assistance, and early childhood educators can not make a living with the median average wage at \$13.72 per hour, often without access to health insurance. Program capacity has continued to decrease and challenges with hiring and retaining early educators has reached a crisis point. Without specific and targeted investments being fully realized, we will continue this decline.

The quality of early of an early education program begins and ends with well qualified early educators and program leadership. Unless we assure that there are affordable entry points into the profession, resources for those currently in the workforce, and proper compensation for the important work early educators do, we will not stop the exodus of early educators out of the field and we will never attract new educators.

Addressing affordability for families must be a top priority. We can not hope to have a strong economy if families can not afford to work, yet this is the reality our state faces. Most families now face a difficult choice, do I work to support my family when the majority of my paycheck is paying for early education or will I stay home and begin accessing other social supports for my family.

H171 calls for several key actions and investments that are the first steps necessary to addressing the affordability and accessibility to quality early education for our working families.

Theses include:

Affordable and Accessible

Changes to Child care Financial Assistance over time that move us from reimbursements to programs being based on market rate to cost of care and moves to a structure where families pay no more than 10% of their household income. These changes, when fully implemented, will mean that the 70% of working families will be able to afford the desperately needed early education services and programs will be able to compensate early educators with wages that are commensurate with peers in other fields.

Quality

This is a 3 prong approach to providing the supports and resources to build a pipeline into the early education profession and to retaining those early educators currently in the workforce. All 3 prongs are crucial to building the much needed capacity in early education programs.

1. Funding for scholarships for the current workforce to create a true pathway from those who have little to no education to those who are working to attain their Teaching License is critical. While we have scholarships that support early educators in attaining their Apprenticeship Certificate, Associates Degree and a Teacher License Endorsement, we need additional funding to sustain the current 95 recipients. Additionally, we are missing the crucial scholarship support for those needing to move from Associates to bachelors. There are currently 40 early educators on our wait list for this scholarship. We are seeking funding to support 25 BA scholarships. The Governor's budget allocates \$150,000 for this purpose. We need \$300,000 total to fund the current program and expand to include bachelor's degrees.
2. Creating a loan repayment program for those newer early educators working in private community programs with a degree is an important vehicle to retaining quality early educators. It is this population that can not afford their basic living expenses (car, rent, food) and their monthly student loan and unfortunately often choose to leave the programs they work in to find a position that pays them a livable wage. The loan repayment program outlined in H171 would allow these early educators to remain in community-based programs.
3. Scholarship funds will be available for our higher education institutions to assist students who wish to attain an early education degree and are attending minimally part-time. This option makes it affordable for students at our state colleges and universities to obtain early childhood education or special education degrees to build the pipeline of future early educators.

We are at a crucial moment in time. We know that early education is essential to our economy and the healthy growth and development of our young children. We have seen the fragility of this industry. If we do not address affordability, access ability and quality and make targeted and intentional investments in the early education system now, we will lose this industry as we have watched happen in other states. That would truly be a cost we could not afford.