



Date: January 28, 2021
To: Chair Pugh and members of the House Committee on Human Services
CC: Representative Jessica Brumsted
From: Dr. Morgan Crossman, Executive Director, Building Bright Futures and Dora Levinson, Data and Policy Director, Building Bright Futures
Re: How are Vermont's Young Children and Families?

My name is Dr. Morgan Crossman, the Executive Director of [Building Bright Futures](#) (BBF). Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to your committee with regard to the state of our children and families Vermont and in regard to BBF's role in supporting the success of children, families and the early childhood service system. I have never been more proud to be a Vermonter. The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the strength and resilience of families, communities, and Vermont's early childhood system to be nimble in a rapidly changing world. Thank you for this committee's leadership and work to support Vermont's children and families. Today's testimony will largely focus on the impact of the pandemic on children and families as we collectively navigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

I will start with a brief overview of BBF's role and infrastructure, present the most up-to-date data from the COVID-19 spotlight in How Are Vermont's Young Children and Families Report and the 2020 State Advisory Council Recommendations, and present information gathered last week from the Building Bright Futures statewide network.

Building Bright Futures' Role in Vermont's Early Childhood System

BBF is Vermont's early childhood public-private partnership charged under Act 104 to serve as the State Advisory Council on Early Childhood, the mechanism used to advise the Governor and legislature on the status of children in the prenatal period through age eight and their families. BBF's mission is to improve the well-being of children and families in Vermont by using evidence to inform policy and bringing voices together across sectors and within regions to discuss critical challenges and problem-solve. BBF is the only organization in Vermont with the infrastructure necessary to adapt to emerging legislative, community, public and private needs, and support the system to address the complex health, education, behavioral health, and safety conditions surrounding all children from the prenatal period to age eight and their families:

- A network of 12 Regional Councils;
- 7 Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP) committees upholding and monitoring the Early Childhood vision and strategic plan for Vermont;
- The State Advisory Council (SAC) brings together cross-sector early childhood leaders to issue recommendations, increase coordination to advance a connected and evolving early childhood system, and advise the Governor and Legislature.



Under Vermont’s Act 104, BBF’s responsibilities include convening early childhood stakeholders to build a coordinated system of care; empowering families and communities to lead; monitoring the early childhood service system by utilizing high quality data to guide strategy and policy decision-making; responding to fill gaps in the system to support the needs of children and families; and advising the Governor, Administration and Legislature on policy and systems improvements for children from the prenatal period to age eight and their families. The BBF infrastructure provides a united vision for Vermont’s early childhood system and holds the Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP) to achieve it.

Data & Resources for Legislators and Early Childhood Partners

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we’ve continued to serve in this role and provide the most up-to-date, high quality information we can to decision-makers and to communities. The following documents produced by BBF during the COVID-19 pandemic serve as important resources for the legislature, early childhood stakeholders, and community partners statewide and give a full picture of the state of Vermont’s children and families.

- [Vermont's 2020 Early Childhood Needs Assessment](#) highlighted the conditions of the early care and education system for Vermont’s 35,769 children birth through age 5, examining the strengths and opportunities for the EC system at this critical time. This is an 80-paged resource including a 10-page data gaps table.
- [Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan \(VECAP\)](#) is the state’s strategic plan for the system supporting children prenatal through age eight and their families including strategies to move us toward the 4 articulated goals
- [2020 Early Childhood Family Engagement Assessment Report](#) led by 22 parent ambassadors across Vermont makes recommendations for how we partner with families to create positive child and family outcomes
- [2020 How are Vermont's Young Children and Families Report](#) and The State of Vermont's Young Children and Families [Briefing](#) held on January 11th, 2021
- [BBF’s Statement on Diversity, Equity, Social Justice, and Inclusion](#) formally adopted by the State Advisory Council in June 2020 shows our commitment to dispelling systemic racism and injustice in the early childhood system

Our Collective Vision

Vermont’s Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP) holds the vision and strategic plan for the early childhood system. The following visualization puts a face and a name to this collective vision.



In the year 2026, a child is born to a family in Vermont. We will call her baby Mariah. Vermont is a state where all children and families are accepted for who they are and we support this child from the very start all the way through their development and education. This child thrives with the loving care of her parents and caregivers. Her family is safe and stable in their home and have food in their fridge today and on the horizon. Baby Mariah’s parents use paid family leave and home visiting to support the physical and mental health of both parents and baby. The family is connected to their diverse community and can access services, resources and support they need including but not limited to high quality child care, a faith community, mental health support, healthy food and jobs. Mariah grows into a toddler, preschooler and eventually transitions into the local elementary school. She is resilient to navigate even the difficult days she will face.

Mariah does not yet know there is a community holding her and her family through a seamless system of support. This is a system where all children have a healthy start. Where families and communities play a leading role in children’s well-being. Where families have access to high quality opportunities that meet their needs. And where the early childhood system is integrated, well resourced and data-informed. This is the future.

The State of Vermont’s Young Children and Families

The [2020 How are Vermont’s Young Children and Families Report](#) includes the **five Early Childhood State Advisory Council (SAC) Recommendations** as well as a snapshot of the most **up-to-date data on the well-being of young children, their families, and the early childhood system**. Today’s testimony will focus on the challenges children and families face in the areas of basic needs, mental health, and child development and education. Not only has the pandemic impacted service provision, it has, and will continue to impact the data. The first data elements are drawn from the COVID-19 data spotlight (pgs 12-13). This section highlights that **data collected during and reported from the COVID-19 period may be an outlier**, meaning the data may not follow the existing trend. We are still reporting this data because it’s the most up-to-date information we have, AND it will be important, as we move forward, to watch how the data trends may change over the next year, three years, and five years to understand the impact of the pandemic on outcomes and service provision for children and families and their well-being. Even prior to the pandemic, collecting, reporting and accessing high quality data was a challenge here in Vermont. The 2020 Early Childhood Needs Assessment clearly identified that **high quality data is a significant need and included an 8 page data gaps table** (the data we seek to inform decision making but do not yet have available) to help us prioritize data moving forward. This theme is also represented in the SAC Recommendations.



BBF State Advisory Council Recommendations

Detailed 2020 State Advisory Council Recommendations can be found in the [How are Vermont's Young Children and Families Report](#), pgs 6-11. Each recommendation identifies which level of the Early Childhood system is targeted for change within the next year and how it is aligned with Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP).

- 1. RECOGNIZE VERMONT'S EARLY CARE & EDUCATION SYSTEM & WORKFORCE AS ESSENTIAL**
- 2. MITIGATE COVID IMPACTS ON FAMILY ECONOMIC STABILITY & MENTAL HEALTH**
- 3. RECOGNIZE CHRONIC INEQUITIES & RACISM AS A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS**
- 4. EMPOWER FAMILY VOICE TO REBUILD A STRONGER SYSTEM**
- 5. EVOLVE OUR DATA SYSTEM TO ADDRESS GAPS**

A. RECOGNIZE VERMONT'S EARLY CARE & EDUCATION SYSTEM & WORKFORCE AS ESSENTIAL

Recommendation 1: Fund education costs and compensation for the early childhood education workforce, including scholarships, loan repayment, and wage supplementation.

- Sufficiently fund and expand scholarship programs for early educators and maintain this revenue annually.
- Establish a loan repayment program for early educators.
- Establish a wage supplement program to progress toward adequate compensation for early educators.
- Prioritize workforce development and hazard pay for this sector.

Recommendation 2: Continue investment in redesigning the state's Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) by making progress in alignment with Year 3 of the state's 5-year plan, including:

- Increase the CCFAP rate paid to early care and education providers so those reimbursement rates closely reflect the true cost of high-quality care thereby reducing the burden on early care and education programs to subsidize the system through low wages and other cost-saving efforts.
- Fully support needed investments in the technology system(s), staff and resources required to implement the redesigned CCFAP structure and providing an accessible platform for families, educators, and administrators.

B. MITIGATE COVID IMPACTS ON FAMILY ECONOMIC STABILITY & MENTAL HEALTH

Recommendation 1: Mitigate the health and economic effects of the pandemic on families.



- Extend economic support beyond expiration of CARES Act funds that expire in December.
- Extend flexibility in eligibility for programs (e.g. Reach Up work requirements) so parents can engage in other activities that help them invest in their future and integral to the health and well-being of their family.

Recommendation 2: Sustain and strengthen the integration of mental health services for children and families through flexible funding for integrated mental health across settings.

- Continue to allow telehealth to be covered by insurance so families can access the care they need.
- Invest in flexible service delivery and availability.
- Focus on mental health prevention and staff burnout across many settings

*Please see the [*How Are Vermont's Young Children and Families? Report Supplement: Early Childhood and Family Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic January 2021*](#) for more detailed information on mental health data, promising practices, and data limitations.

C. RECOGNIZE CHRONIC INEQUITIES & RACISM AS A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

Recommendation 1: Partner with Vermont's Racial Equity Task Force to identify and build structures of support for racially diverse populations and address health disparities and systemic impacts of racism.

Recommendation 2: Align and integrate equity initiatives to leverage impact and expertise across sectors and early childhood partners to inform strategies in the Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan and early childhood system.

D. EMPOWER FAMILY VOICE TO REBUILD A STRONGER SYSTEM

Recommendation 1: Increase opportunities for parent and caregiver representatives to serve on committees, legislatively mandated study sections and decision making bodies to inform local and state policy, practice and resource allocation.

- Require each legislatively mandated board/committee/study section have at least 1 parent representative with lived experience.

Recommendation 2: Commit to ensuring that children and families are in all policies.

- Similar to the “health in all policies” initiative, this recommendation is based on incorporating child development and family well-being considerations into all decision-making across sectors and policy areas.
- At the state-agency and community-based partners level, and at the policy-making level, review programs, policies and legislation to ensure that revisions and requirements consider the impact and consequences to child development and family well-being.

E. EVOLVE OUR DATA SYSTEM TO ADDRESS GAPS



Recommendation 1: Restart and support the Early Childhood Data Governance Council and utilize the BBF Data and Evaluation Committee to identify and elevate data gaps and align priorities through cross-sector collaboration.

Recommendation 2: Promote data literacy and using data to inform policy across sectors by educating Vermonters about the importance of high-quality data collection, reporting and integration.

Recommendation 3: Fully fund existing early childhood data initiatives to fidelity: Early Childhood Information System (e.g. Bright Futures Information System, Children’s Integrated Services) and the State Longitudinal Data System.

Recommendation 4: Create an early childhood budget that identifies all financial sources dedicated to children and their families from prenatal to age eight to monitor, align and leverage financial resources.

DATA SNAPSHOT

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the strength and resilience of families, communities, and Vermont’s early childhood system. We have seen that inequities are greater for children and families living in rural areas, BIPOC, non-native English speakers, those with lesser incomes, and children with special health care needs. The following data points provide a snapshot of how the pandemic is impacting children and families as well as indicators to watch as we come out of this public health crisis.

Food insecurity (2020 COVID data). *Food insecurity has risen across all counties in Vermont.* We know that meeting children’s basic needs is critical to all other areas of their development. Without proper nutrition, children are not able to learn, grow and thrive. Additionally, the stress of being unable to meet the basic physiological needs of food and shelter impacts the ability of parents and caregivers to create an environment where children can thrive.

Family Support Calls (2020 COVID data). *There were fewer calls to child protection hotlines in the months of March through May 2020 than there were in 2019.* This period was during the stay home stay safe order starting in March 2020 alongside the closure of child cares and schools. With many children not participating in their traditional care and community settings, mandated reporters may not have had contact or ‘eyes on’ children to monitor their safety or to report potential abuse or neglect. The same trend in a reduction in calls to child protection hotlines is in line with other states across the country during the pandemic. This does NOT mean that there aren’t as many cases of abuse and neglect happening; just that they may be going unreported. This is particularly concerning given the stress and isolation families have faced.

Between May and June 2020, 2-1-1 saw an increase of 600% in families reaching out for support, largely in the areas of food resources, Other basic needs, and Calls for problem solving/listening support. Families are struggling through this pandemic, and while they have demonstrated resilience and we’ve seen public and private partners step up to meet their needs, we can’t underestimate the impact of the pandemic on the health, mental health and well-being of our children and families.



Child mental health (pre-COVID data). *1 in 5 children between the ages of 6-8 has an emotional, behavioral or mental health condition.* This mental health statistic may be one of the most critical indicators to watch in coming years to understand how the pandemic has impacted the mental health of our children across all ages and consequently, how we need to adjust our practices across settings and ages to meet their needs.

There has been a fairly consistent number of children served by Vermont's Designated Mental Health Agencies between 2016 and 2020. A slight decrease in utilization can be seen in 2020 data and an overall increasing trend over time since 2000. It's important to point out again, the 2020 data may be an outlier. The timing and reporting of this data is such that it may not be reflective of the actual number of children served based on the reporting cycle and is Not reflective of the anecdotal evidence of need that we as a state have heard in the last 9 months. We don't currently have a way to estimate the demand or need for these mental health services, only the utilization of the services.

*Please see the [How Are Vermont's Young Children and Families? Report Supplement: Early Childhood and Family Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic January 2021](#) for more detailed information on mental health data, promising practices, and data limitations.

Child care (pre-COVID data). There is a great deal of evidence on the importance of high quality child care for our young children, not only with respect to child development but also to ensure that families are able to work and keep our economy moving forward. Child care is also a setting in which children (and their families) are able to access a range of services and resources such as early intervention, special education services for preschool-aged children, make connections to nutrition support, and identify concerns in child development among others. *Of children likely to need care, 62% of infants, 27% of toddlers, and 30 % of preschool-aged children DO NOT have access to full day, full year, regulated child care programs.* The COVID-19 pandemic has only complicated the already dire struggle to secure high-quality, affordable child care for Vermont's youngest and most vulnerable children and their families with programs reducing capacity or hours in order to meet the guidelines to keep everyone safe. Questions remain about what demand will look like moving forward and how families make decisions about care for their young children.

Child Development and Educational Assessments (pre-COVID data). Vermont currently reports on three primary indicators to measure children's knowledge, skills, and behaviors: Teaching Strategies Gold, the Agency of Education's Ready for Kindergarten! Survey, and Third Grade Language Arts (reading) and Math. However, these educational outcomes for young children are difficult to measure and often subjective.

- **Teaching Strategies GOLD (TSGOLD):** in the 2018-2019 school year, *85% or more of students assessed met or exceeded expectations across literacy, math, and social emotional domains* for both 3 and 4 year olds.
- **Agency of Education's Ready for Kindergarten! Survey (R4K!S):** Kindergarten teachers assess students on 34 items across five domains. Last fall, *84% of Vermont's children assessed were ready for kindergarten.* However, readiness rates vary based on race, economic status, and other factors of vulnerability. One thing not visually represented here is the trend over time.

There has not been noteworthy changes over time since 2015 in the percent of children ready for kindergarten.

- **Third Grade Language Arts (reading) and Math:** *Of all students assessed in 3rd grade, 50% are proficient in reading and 53% in math.* Similar to the Ready for Kindergarten Survey data, there have not been noteworthy changes since the 2015/2016 school year and proficiency rates vary significantly based on race, economic status, and other factors.

While these assessments are not directly comparable, it is important for us to look across these three indicators and see where there are opportunities for improvement, especially in light of the expected setbacks from the COVID-19 pandemic. The striking differences between assessments at ages 3 to 5 and those at age 8 have prompted Vermont’s leaders, including Governor Scott, the Secretary of Education and members of the State Advisory Council to pay closer attention to this data and to look for opportunities for improvement. We can anticipate a focus on literacy in the next several years.

Ongoing Data Limitations & Challenges. It is critical to note challenges in the data infrastructure (systems to collect and report data) and our ability to truly understand child care demand, capacity, and enrollment for child care specifically. Vermont’s EC databases are inadequate in providing a full picture of service provision and how it relates to child and family outcomes. As mentioned earlier, BBF produced an 8-page data gaps table to help identify data priorities moving forward. There is much work to be done in this arena and the State Advisory Council has prioritized evolving our data systems to address gaps through the 2020 Recommendations. BBF has begun to address these gaps through **Vermont’s Early Childhood Resource, Data, and Policy Center**. More information about the Center is below.



January 2021 Stakeholder Perspectives

In our advisory role, BBF is committed to presenting the most up-to-date data on the status of children, families, and the early childhood system. Just as important, is BBF’s ability to capture and produce the perspectives from families as well as early childhood professionals across all sectors quickly and efficiently. These information gathering efforts allow the Legislature, Agency Leadership and early childhood stakeholders to see a point-in-time snapshot of perspectives on key initiatives, outcomes for children and families, challenges, strengths, and solutions to move forward.

Method of Information Gathering

BBF piloted a new way of quickly and efficiently gathering information for legislative testimony this morning. Upon receiving the request to testify on today’s topics, we immediately sent out a feedback request to all layers of the BBF network asking for responses to the following 3 questions within 24 hours:

1. What is the pandemic's impact on children and families? Share your experiences, observations and/or data.
2. What have been the challenges/barriers and opportunities in Vermont's COVID-19 response to child care?



3. What would be helpful going forward as we continue to navigate and recover from the pandemic?

This information was requested, compiled, and analyzed for themes between Tuesday night, January 19 and Wednesday night, January 20th by the BBF team. This method allowed us to capture **69 responses representing all 12 regions of the state across 32 sectors** including parents, health care, mental health care, business, early childhood education (serving children 0-8), non-profit, food security, and state government. Our data and policy team analyzed the responses and identified 7 key themes. 60% of respondents reported they were parents of a child under 9 (categories were not mutually exclusive).

It is important to note that responses reflect a large range of viewpoints but may not reflect all Vermont families and professionals across the early childhood system as we did not conduct a systematic survey.

Key Themes

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children, Families and the Early Childhood System
1. Basic Needs/Family Economic Impact
2. Child and Family Well-Being
3. Child Development
4. Health
5. Organizational Financial Stability
6. Social Connection and Relationships
7. Inequities and Gaps Widening for Subgroups of the Population

1. Basic Needs/Family Economic Impact

“As a family, despite being in a comfortable situation prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (two parent household, fully employed, safely housed, stable-income, good family/friend support), the pandemic has all but ravaged our familial sense of security and safety. We no longer feel as though we are thriving and raising our young daughter, but rather just barely surviving.” - Parent/Caregiver Response

“Families right now need to be prepared for unexpected school and childcare closures at any time due to the pandemic, in addition to missing work when their child(ren) is experiencing any symptom that could be related to COVID-19. Missing a day of work could mean taking that time off without pay, using PTO that might need to be used for other unexpected events or illnesses, and may put some parents at risk of losing their employment.” - Children’s Integrated Services Provider

“The stress families are under is palpable. We mostly serve families that qualify 100% CCFAP, so these were families already near or actually homeless. They have a precarious existence somewhere between utterly inadequate benefits and the complete loss of those benefits if they earn even a little bit more than they previously did. It isn’t hard to see why so many young children enter our center with Adverse



Childhood Experience scores to rival those of many adults. COVID-19 has only exacerbated the existing problems.” -Early Childhood Professional

Families are facing challenges financially with job loss or job insecurity, which can in turn lead to challenges related to housing/housing costs, loss of medical/health insurance and food insecurity. Parents are struggling to meet the demands of balancing work and home schooling/care for children who are participating in remote learning or whose childcare/school has closed due to exposure risk. Rates of hunger have risen dramatically nationally and in our state. This has disproportionately affected families with young children. When families and children do not have access to enough food that is culturally appropriate, they are unable to meet other basic needs. The following topics were raised:

- Challenges accessing food
- Internet connectivity
- Economic vulnerability and financial instability (e.g. unemployment, reduction in hours, lack of child care, loss of health insurance)

“With the hybrid model of schooling there has been such a steady increase in the monetary need for families to pay for childcare – this is an unbudgeted expense that is breaking our families.” -Parent and Representative from a Mutual Aid Organization

“Since COVID, we have had extremely limited childcare availability because our daycare is running significantly reduced hours, 45 hours of care pre-pandemic to 28 hours currently, despite a tuition hike in 2021. With such limited childcare availability, we have been forced to hire private teachers at an additional cost to the family, dip into our limited savings while we endure pay cuts and lost wages caused by reduced work hours to take care of our child.” - Healthcare Professional

In addition, child care programs and providers are facing reduced hours, challenges with capacity, and having to increase the cost of childcare (unbudgeted expenses for families) among many other challenges adapting to the health and safety guidelines. Programs and families have demonstrated resilience and have developed innovative ways to care for our children, however, there are significant sacrifices and challenges faced.

2. Child and Family Well-Being

“The pandemic is affecting the emotional state of children. Kids who normally are well-balanced, not quick to cry and generally happy with school have changed in their reactions to their world. This means more kids are acting out, crying and stressing about things that normally wouldn’t phase them and resisting school instruction either remote or in-person.” -Parent and Representative from a Mutual Aid Organization

“The isolation, impact on socialization, increased anxiety all due to this pandemic has been felt in every child and family one way or another.” -Parent/Caregiver

“The pandemic’s impact on my mental health as a mother and a worker: I feel like a failure in most aspects of my life - house is a mess, kids may or may not be on track when they finally do return to



school, I get my work done but I don't feel I am excelling. I basically feel like everything is getting a quarter-effort and I don't feel good about that, especially when it's my kids.” - Parent/Caregiver

“The pandemic has taken a lot of the joy out of parenting. There is so much strategizing at every moment outside of the house and it feels like there's so much risk. At the same time, the strategizing is worth it if it limits risk. All of it is simply exhausting all the time for parents and children.” - Parent and Advocate

Children and families are struggling with their mental health. Children are isolated from each other affecting their social emotional development. Parents are overwhelmed with taking care of more needs more hours a day with less time for themselves to reset. Uncertainties about care for their children and security are stressful. Parents do not have the support systems they need and co-parenting stressors have increased. This isolation, lack of routine and social contact has resulted in increased depression and anxiety among many children and their families. Parents are stressed and are facing unexpected disruptions to school/childcare due to lack of staffing or staff quarantining. COVID-19 has also created stress and strain in the family unit. Many children are spending more time unsupervised and on the internet. The quality of learning is reduced with less time in-person. The following topics were shared:

- Parent/caregiver, child, and family dysregulation, stressors, and challenging behaviors leading to lack of executive functioning (e.g. planning, reasoning, problem solving)
- Fear and uncertainty
- Lack of continuity and challenging transitions (e.g. closures and reopening of child care, hybrid and remote learning, etc.)
- Social isolation, lack of connection or a sense of belonging (within families, social supports, communities, and broader networks)

3. Child Development

“This pandemic has had a negative impact on the social/emotional development of all the children across the board to varying degrees. This is in part due to parental stress (number one stressor seems to be economic uncertainty) leading to a higher rate of negative interactions with their children. It also seems in part due to the lack of socialization outside of childcare (such as at community playgrounds, religious functions, and other social gatherings in which to practice social skills).” -Early Childhood Professional

As outlined in the How are Vermont’s Young Children and Families Report, meeting children’s basic needs is critical to all other areas of their development. Without proper nutrition, for example, children are not able to learn, grow and thrive as we outlined in our vision. Additionally, the stress of being unable to meet the basic physiological needs of food and shelter impacts the ability of parents and caregivers to create an environment where children can thrive. Other factors raised include that some children have been home for 10+ months without interactions with children other than family members. Some children are having to learn through computers rather than face-to-face. There is variability in



which children have access to services that meet their developmental needs. Other topics raised included:

- Concern around parent/caregiver-child interactions given remote work and remote learning and the amount of screen time
- Impact of isolation and receiving care outside of traditional settings on social emotional development
- Lack of continuity and challenging transitions (e.g. closures and reopening of child care, hybrid and remote learning, etc.)
- Challenging behaviors, dysregulation, challenges problem solving and navigating peer relationships, and regressions
- Limited time outside for some children

4. Health

*“With safety protocols in place many families (and children!) are adjusting to the 'new normal' of being in a childcare/school setting with the understanding that it IS safe and the protocols are working!”
-Early Childhood Professional*

COVID-19 has significantly impacted the health of Vermont’s children and families as seen in an earlier section on mental health. However, the concerns raised in this section focused on implementation challenges rather than health outcomes. Families and professionals statewide are consistently strategizing and weighing the risks of exposure through each decision (e.g. whether to go to work, send their child(ren) to child care or school, whether to see family, etc.). These decisions are also impacted by their family’s financial security, meeting basic needs, and mental health. Updated health and safety guidance as well as the availability of PPE and access to the vaccine are contributing factors. Early childhood partners raised the following health-related concerns:

- Challenges accessing appropriate and required PPE
- Consistently monitoring updates to health and safety guidelines and adjusting practices immediately
- As health guidelines tighten, the concern about an increase in days out of school/work
- Continuous weighing risk of exposure with the need for respite and support
- Vaccination of teachers as a priority group should be central and a priority within the next few days to weeks - keeping schools open and children in care is essential to recovery in the state.

5. Organizational Financial Stability

“We’ve had high staff turnover with many choosing to leave the sector and seek opportunities in other sectors. This has greatly influenced consistency of care for kids with varied results.” -Early Childhood Professional



“CCFAP currently reimburses based on attendance. Children’s certificates can be impacted if they are not attending frequently. However, having to quarantine or close due to staffing is beyond our control. This impacts our bottom line greatly as we rely solely on the CCFAP for tuition and do not charge families.” - Parent Child Center Representative

Organizations across the early childhood system reported challenges in financial stability. As identified in the 2020 Early Childhood Needs Assessment, the entire early childhood system has been, and continues to be underfunded, which impacts the ability to most effectively care for the needs of children and families. Many factors are contributing to financial instability:

- Recruiting and retaining qualified staff with high turnover rates
- Enrollment limits due to health and safety guidelines and in many cases limited capacity based on staffing, both leading to reduced revenue
- Challenges meeting the needs of children with special health care needs or developmental delays due to online and remote learning
- Challenges maintaining Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCAFP) funding due to attendance-based reimbursement and inconsistent attendance due to COVID

6. Social Connection and Relationships

“It has been harder to engage with families who need support and have been referred during the pandemic. We have been able to stay connected with most families who we had formed relationships with prior to COVID-19. However, when families do not have as many opportunities for face-to-face connection, especially with someone new who they will need to start to form a trusting relationship with, it can feel a lot harder.” -Children’s Integrated Services Provider

“The strong trusting relationships we build with families make setting and enforcing boundaries easier to swallow for all of us. Building these relationships took time and effort and risk...and now we are watching them become frayed...it makes me so sad because a connected family is a strong family.” -Family Childcare Provider

“Having to drop a child at the door and not help them transition into school adds to the sense of losing all sense of community among parents and caregivers.” -Parent/Caregiver

“As a woman, our communities and supports are nonexistent. Families cannot travel or gather for support, and friends cannot enter each other’s homes. This erodes the very foundational communities that we rely on to raise our children.” -Parent/Caregiver

Maintaining relationships and connections has been a consistent theme since the start of the pandemic. Isolation has plagued all Vermonters as we have followed health and safety guidance. Child care programs and educators have elevated concerns specifically in connecting with families and the children they’re caring for/educating. Concerns in this domain also reflect the lack of peer or peer connections, relationships and personal support networks for young children and families. Key topics include:



- Provider/educator ability to connect and communicate with families about best ways to support children including both parties' capacity to engage
- Challenges associated with building and maintaining trust (e.g. with people, programs, communities, etc.)
- Reduced opportunities for children to interact, socialize, compete and play with their peers

7. Inequities and Gaps Widening for Subgroups of the Population

*“Last year the Springfield School District served 134 Prek Students. This year we are serving 97 in person and 12 remote. Our programs are at capacity but capacity has dropped since the pandemic.”
-School Administrator/Early Childhood System Professional*

“Students with special needs and their families have been pushed further in having to decide on full-time care and special education services. Parents may have refused a part-time placement in a school program fearing the risks of being in 2 programs. Referrals for EI and ECSE have decreased perhaps due to less contact with family, pediatricians, playgroups and other young families.” -School Administrator/System Professional

“We mostly work with families of children with special health care needs and disabilities. For those with mental health or learning disabilities, there has been a notable increase in difficult behaviors in that child at home, which impacts everyone who lives with the child, including siblings. Violent behaviors, anxiety, depression and outbursts are all things families are struggling with more during the pandemic. For families of children who are medically fragile, the challenge has been how to keep that child safe from germs while still getting some respite and help. A lot of families are just feeling really stretched thin-- financially, emotionally, and even physically.” -Public Health Professional

COVID-19 has exacerbated the opportunity and achievement gaps that already existed. Families report still struggling to access services. Children without reliable access to needed technology suffered from being disconnected to mental health providers, and specialists they accessed pre-pandemic. While some semblance of normalcy has returned for some children, others remain without services and access to the supports they need. This is particularly true for children with disabilities and special health care needs and low-income families among others. This is impacting children across the age spectrum; infants through school age. Key topics include:

- COVID has disproportionately affected Vermont's BIPOC children and families. Inequities in access to and quality of health care, education, employment, housing, mental health, and social support services also contribute to higher rates of underlying or chronic medical conditions has been documented and tracked and is worth noting here out of sustained concern for the impact of young children.
- Concern for perinatal and postpartum support- both during the birthing process and support postpartum for both the baby and parent's physical and mental health.



- Access to necessary special education services and the transition for early intervention (IDEA Part C) to special education (IDEA Part B) is challenging and families are still reporting disruption of services and are anticipating short and long-term impacts on gaps in service receipt.

Vermont's Early Childhood Successes

- Vermont has mobilized quickly to respond to the needs of children and families, especially the emergency child care needs of essential persons, in addition to designing a plan to ensure child care programs are able to reopen their doors once this has ended.
- Vermont's children and families have managed stress and demonstrated resilience by connecting virtually, sharing resources, setting up peer support groups, caring for each other by providing meals, masks, grocery pickups and more.
- Vermont's successful response to COVID-19 is due to leadership and integration. Vermont is one of the only states in the country who has leaned heavily on, and integrated the expertise of our Maternal and Child Health experts in emergency response.
- Vermont has prioritized the stability of the early childhood system by infusing over \$40 million dollars since the state of emergency was first declared.
- Vermont has recognized child care as essential to both meeting the developmental and educational needs of children AND ensuring economic vitality in getting parents and caregivers back to work.
- Early educators have developed innovative ways of teaching and supporting the social emotional development and continued learning of Vermont's children in remote, hybrid, and outdoor settings.
- There have been incredible cross-agency, cross-sector, public-private partnerships and communication emerging.

Stakeholder Perceptions of Key Considerations Moving Forward

Despite the challenges we have faced over the past 11 months, there are lessons learned and opportunities moving forward.

- Examine and improve the interconnected early childhood system beyond the scope and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- For the duration of the pandemic, find creative ways to build connections and community. With each other, with those we serve, among children.
- In the post pandemic recovery, invest in rebuilding strong relationships and trust with families (e.g home visiting, small ratios, communication tools) Invest in a 2-generation approach to build trust and connection with parents/caregivers to improve child outcomes.
- Virtual engagement has been better in some cases than in person services and meetings. Successful models include: Telehealth services (covered by insurance), virtual testimony, community and systems meetings, training and professional development, and support groups
- Mental, emotional, and behavioral challenges for children and families will not end when restrictions are lifted. Services, resources, and supports will all be in high demand.
- Financial support will continue to be required beyond the end of the pandemic



- Opportunities for broad stakeholder participation in policy decisions increases buy-in and ensures that policies are reflective of the diversity of Vermont perspectives.

Vermont's Early Childhood Resource Data and Policy Center

Vermont's legislature, statewide Early Childhood partners, and the Early Childhood Needs Assessment have repeatedly highlighted the need for data to be centralized, accessible and understandable to inform policy. Building Bright Futures created Vermont's Early Childhood Resource, Data, and Policy Center to meet this need. The Center includes the following components:

- A catalog of high-quality resources for families, communities, and early childhood professionals
- National and Vermont-specific datasets, data spotlights, and related policy recommendation briefs and fact sheets
- A data dashboard or scorecard to monitor indicators identified in Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP)
- Reports and publications from BBF, agency, and community partners
- Recorded research presentations, webinars, and early childhood grand rounds
- A portal for stakeholders to ask questions and report data gaps and priorities

Paired with the How are Vermont's Young Children and Families? report, the Center provides data and resources on a full range of early childhood topics across sectors focused on children, families, communities, programs, services or policy questions. By helping to raise the visibility of key issues affecting Vermont's children and families, Vermont's Early Childhood Resource, Data, and Policy Center makes it easier for leaders, policymakers, families, and communities to use data to make informed policy and program decisions.

BBF's statewide infrastructure supports our ability to consistently communicate with decision-makers and the field for streamlined feedback loops. The BBF team is honored to serve as a resource to the legislature, families and early childhood partners. BBF is committed to providing the most up-to-date, high-quality information and data to inform decision-making at all times. Thank you for continuing to keep children and families at the center of our decision-making.

Thank you very much for your consideration of these topics.

Sincerely,

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