

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 and 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. Thank you for your leadership!

It has 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 wage at \$14.80 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 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 also 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.

The Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VtAEYC) strongly supports H.171, which 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. We also have a few suggestions for how the bill could be changed to better support Vermont children and families, in addition to Vermont's early childhood educators.

We would like to highlight our support for the following components of the bill as they relate to the early childhood education workforce:

Affordability and Accessibility

H.171 keeps us on the path towards achieving the five year redesign plan for the Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP), which continues to incrementally address family affordability. In 2021, that means aligning CCFAP federal poverty guidelines with the 2021 federal poverty guidelines, expanding income eligibility for the program from 300% FPL to 350% FPL, extending full financial assistance to families earning up to 150% FPL, and changing how family contributions are structured from a per child payment to a family copayment. All of these changes will have immediate and positive impact on Vermont families.

These investments are critical now, and we also know that further changes CCFAP are needed 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 where all parents are in the workforce 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. The studies in this bill are so important to help us chart a course toward that future.

Quality & Supports for the Early Childhood Education Workforce

H.171 takes 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 three prongs are crucial to building much needed capacity in early childhood education programs. VtAEYC supports the language and appropriations outlined in Sections 6-8 of H.171, which include: a

- 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. H.171 includes \$300,000 to fully fund the current program and expand to include bachelor's degrees.
- 2. Creating a student 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. \$1.8 million in funding to support the loan repayment program outlined in H.171 would allow these early educators to remain in community-based programs.
- 3. Scholarship funds for prospective early childhood educators.** This program will be available for our higher education institutions to assist students who wish to attain an early education degree and are attending at least part-time. H.171 includes \$400,000 to fund these scholarships, which will make 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.

Suggestions to strengthen H.171:

It bears repeating that VtAEYC strongly supports H.171; we would also like to offer the following suggestions as ways to further strengthen this bill for children and families. We believe the following changes to H.171 are crucial both in this moment, and for the long term change we know is needed in Vermont's early childhood education system:

- In Section 1, we suggest including legislative intent language that highlights that the Legislature intends that no family spend more than 10% of their income on child care, and that early childhood educators are compensated in a way that is commensurate with their peers in other

fields. These goals are referenced in the financing study in Section 14 of the bill, but we believe they should be specifically named in the legislative intent of the bill as well.

- In Section 2, we suggest paying Child Care Financial Assistance Program tuition to programs based on children's enrollment instead of based on attendance. This change would make a big difference in stabilizing programs, and supporting CCFAP families' access to care. As a program director myself, I see firsthand the difference this change could make. Though the administration has a relatively generous approach to permitting absences, it still creates additional burden on families and programs to justify absences that is not present for other families in care. In addition, the number of paid days we can provide to our staff for professional development and much-needed time off are severely limited by the current system.
- In Section 10, we suggest amending the reporting deadline so that the Legislature has the report and recommendation by January of 2023, in time to take action during the next legislative biennium, and making sure that funds will be available this year for both this study and the systems analysis included in Section 14. The financing study and the systems analysis are critical to achieving our vision for Vermont's early childhood education system, and must be prioritized in this bill.

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 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.

Thank you for your time, and for your continued commitment to Vermont children, families, early childhood education programs, and early educators.