

ACT 76 MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS

WCAX: Advocates say \$125M law is easing child care crisis: The newly renovated Homestead School held a ribbon cutting. State and community leaders were in attendance at the South Burlington location as recent renovations were unveiled to expand capacity by over 40 slots, upgrade facilities, and increase compensation for staff. After Vermont lawmakers passed Act 76, owners of the Homestead School expressed confidence in moving forward with the new project knowing they'd be getting additional support from the state in the very near future.

Vermont Community Newspaper Group: Child care reform takes shape within Chittenden County: Advocates, lawmakers and child care providers are celebrating what they call a "quantum leap" with the Legislature's passage of Act 76, a bill that invests \$125 million annually into early childhood education.

EDNC: As sites close in North Carolina, 'a new era of child care' begins in Vermont: On a recent Wednesday in South Burlington a teacher blew bubbles over two infants lying side by side, of the 40 young children now able to attend The Homestead, a private child care program that just opened a new site.

Caledonian Record: Child Care Advocates Celebrate Progress at St. Johnsbury Event: (paywall – article copied below as well) Legislators, advocates for improving Vermont's child care system, parents and community members gathered in St. Johnsbury to celebrate the progress from the 2023 Child Care Bill and highlight the impact it will have in their communities. The program that was featured was ABC & LOL, a 5-star center that because of Act 76 is expanding by 55 slots while also increasing compensation and seeing a welcome uptick in applications for open teacher positions.

Brattleboro Reformer: Vermont leads with new child care law, Act 76: The new bill has allowed the Beaver Brook Children's School in Wilmington to set a \$20 per hour minimum wage, matching many of the larger employers in the Deerfield Valley and Southern Vermont. Beaver Brook also will now have more families who will benefit from the Childcare Financial Assistance Program expansions, seeing lower tuition copays because of Act 76.

Stowe Reporter: Child Care Providers see benefits of state subsidies in Lamoille County: A collection of parents, lawmakers, advocates and child care providers gathered in the partially constructed new addition to Apple Tree Learning Center in Stowe earlier this month to tout the benefits of a slew of state subsidies that proponents claim is already having a transformative effect on an essential but troubled Vermont industry.

Caledonian Record: Child Care Advocates Celebrate Progress At St. Johnsbury Event

Advocates for improving Vermont's child care system, legislators, parents and community members gathered in St. Johnsbury Thursday to celebrate the progress from the 2023 Child Care Bill and highlight the impact it will have across the state.

The Courage in Action Child Care Tour, spearheaded by the nonprofit advocacy group Let's Grow Kids, stopped by ABC & LOL Child Care Center in St. Johnsbury Center to promote last session's passage of Act 76 and recognize the dramatic expansion at the child care center that now has programs across the region and continues to expand.

Earlier this year, the Vermont Legislature passed the 2023 Child Care Bill which invests an additional \$125 million annually into Vermont's child care system to stabilize the sector and help provide access to affordable, quality child care for Vermont families. Implementation of the new law will ramp up in the coming months and proponents say child care centers are already growing and improving in anticipation of the full funding to begin in January.

On display was the dramatic expansion that ABC & LOL has recently undergone and still has in the works. Site director Taylor Brink provided a tour of their St. Johnsbury Center location, showcasing the myriad classrooms for infants through after-school students, as well as the neighboring buildings they have purchased and are in the process of renovating to accommodate more children and meet the needs of the community.

Brink said recent grants and the anticipated funding from Act 76 has allowed the center to expand, further develop its administrative team to include a family outreach coordinator, get fully staffed, and open up new slots for children.

"We've been buying up all the buildings in the area if you haven't noticed," said Brink as she led the large crowd through the various buildings.

Besides the growing campus in St. Johnsbury Center, ABC & LOL has another after school program on Memorial Drive in St. Johnsbury and programs in Peacham. They will open another site in Cabot by the end of the month and are renovating a building they purchased next to the campus in St. Johnsbury Center to have open by the end of the year.

All told ABC & LOL serve hundreds of children and families across their current five programs with the two more on the way. ABC & LOL currently employs 68 people and anticipates being up to 80 or 85 by the time the new building opens in December.

Brink described the variety of services they provide, including assistance for families navigating the health insurance marketplace, supplemental food supplies, help with housing, transportation and more.

Brink also said she and ABC & LOL owner Heather Smires have even been able to begin offering wage increases to their employees, thanks to the funding that is coming from Act 76.

“That’s the power of high quality child care,” commented Let’s Grow Kids CEO Aly Richards during the tour Thursday.

Despite the progress, more work needs to be done.

“We have a wait-list for all of our age groups at all of our locations,” said Brink, which is fairly typical of the child care system across the state and one of the principal motivations for the legislative action.

“It’s amazing to think about how much this money is helping our programs, but also the programs in the area, and the community as a whole,” said Brink. “This funding has helped us and will continue to help us develop and grow our centers while upgrading them to be able to meet the individual needs of each of the children and families that are involved in our child care center.”

“Act 76 has given programs like ours the confidence to expand,” added Brink. One goal they have for 2024 is to finally be able to offer employees health care, said Brink, who noted that the NEK still has persistent need and is anticipating the closure of several home day care operations in the year ahead.

“We’ve never been closer to fully solving Vermont’s child care crisis than we are today,” Brink added.

“Simply put we are now a leader in the nation for early childhood education and you’re seeing what that looks like right here in real time,” said Richards, who described the recent bill as historic and thanked the legislators on hand, including Rep. Mike Marcotte, R-Orleans-Lamoile, Rep. Bobby Farlice-Rubio, D-Caledonia 1, and Rep. Scott Campbell, D-Caledonia-Essex, along with other supporters of the campaign.

Richards said the legislation will help create new slots for children, increase compensation and improve the overall quality of child care, as was being demonstrated by ABC & LOL, while work remained to ensure the successful implementation of the changes and funding across the state.

Richards also highlighted the support that Act 76 will have for smaller home child care programs as well.

In remarks about his support for the bill, Marcotte described child care as an economic development issue and one of the core priorities, along with housing, to helping Vermont grow its workforce and attract young families.

The investments that we’ve made this year are going to pay dividends,” said Marcotte. “I think this is going to make a huge difference.”

“We aren’t going to rest until we have a system of high quality affordable child care that works for Vermonters,” said Richards.

Caledonian Record: Opinion: Heather Smires & Taylor Brink: Our Child Care New Year's Resolution For 2024

At a time when there are significant challenges facing our state, our lawmakers showed courage and dedication by passing the 2023 Child Care Bill – now Act 76. This historic legislation will change the lives of the kids we serve in big ways – and it's already improving the lives of early childhood educators.

We operate five-star child care programs based in the Northeast Kingdom with over 65 employees providing quality early childhood education for 200 kids in our rural region.

Act 76 invests \$125 million annually into the child care system. This funding is being used to help us as well as other child care programs around the state expand and meet the needs of their communities. This funding will help us develop and grow our centers while upgrading them to meet the individual needs of all of the children in our care.

The promise and assurance from this legislation's new and ongoing state funding has allowed us to increase the compensation of our staff members already. These highly-skilled professionals deserve the compensation that allows them to thrive here in Vermont.

On behalf of every early childhood educator who has worked so hard over the years to stay in the field when wages were low, stress was high, wait lists were long, and patience was short, we want to say thank you to lawmakers for stepping up and making the 2023 Child Care Bill a reality. We know there is more to do and there's still a lot of hard work ahead to fully solve the child care crisis, but we are already seeing positive impacts from this legislation and our state's children, families, and economy will be so much stronger for it.

Act 76 has given programs like ours the confidence to expand from our small start in Danville to where we are today and the future is so bright. With the support of Act 76 and child care advocates, we are excited to announce the opening of our sixth and seventh programs; our sixth program just opened in Cabot and our seventh location will be for afterschool-age children in St. Johnsbury. We have grown from a center of two employees to now providing opportunities for 65 early childhood educators serving the communities of St. Johnsbury, Peacham, and Cabot and offering full day and afterschool programming. We continue to plan expansion projects to help meet the needs of our families.

This new law has given us the ability to better plan for the future too. Our New Year's resolution and goal for 2024 is to finally offer our amazing staff health insurance benefits. We know this standard employment benefit will save our state money in the long run when our staff are better able to care for themselves and their families.

Children may only be 24 percent of the population, but they are 100 percent of our future. And every child, beginning at birth, deserves quality, affordable early childhood education, delivered by a well-prepared and well-compensated workforce. Let's continue to work together in 2024 and beyond to fully solve our state's child care crisis.

Heather Smires is the owner of ABC & LOL Child Care Center & Preschool, ABC Little Sprouts and Camp LOL in St. Johnsbury, as well as Peacham Children's Academy and Peacham Afterschool Learning in Peacham, and Taylor Brink, M. Ed., is the Executive Director of ABC & LOL Child Care Center and Preschool.