

Testimony of Christy Swenson
House Human Services Committee
4/11/23

My name is Christy Swenson - I am a co-chair of the Vermont Head Start Association and have worked as the director of Capstone Head Start for five years, serving Lamoille, Washington and Orange Counties. I have spent the majority of my 25 years as a speech-language pathologist working with children birth to five. I am also on Building Bright Futures State Advisory Committee and am a co-chair of the Vermont Interagency Coordinating Council, advising on services for children birth to three with special needs.

Head Start is a program with a mission to serve those children who are most at risk. We provide services prenatal to age five for families that are experiencing homelessness, providing foster care, or very low income (100% of federal poverty guidelines or less). This service is provided in a number of ways across the state; running childcare centers, partnering with other private childcare centers/family providers, partnering with school districts, and home-based services. Regardless of the method of service, all are research-based high-quality early childhood education (ECE) models. Just as importantly, all are designed to provide services to stabilize the family and help them move forward with their goals. This is done with social work services provided to each family with wrap-around supports provided by mental health clinicians, dental hygienists, nursing, and dieticians. This research-based wrap around model is generally considered the template for high-quality ECE provision and has been demonstrated to improve long-term outcomes for children at risk.

The proposed childcare education legislation represents a tremendous move forward on this issue. Notably, the move to cost of care as a basis for childcare subsidy reimbursement, the addressing of the wage gap for ECE teachers, the increase in hours of provision, and the efforts to reduce the cost to families.

I have two concerns regarding the legislation which follow:

1. Enrollment vs. Attendance
 - a. This issue disproportionately impacts children in struggling families as they are more likely to have attendance issues.
 - i. Small business ECE providers will be placed in a position of disenrolling families they know most need their services, because they cannot make their budget model work without all slots paid for.
 - ii. Struggling families will be disproportionately disenrolled from programs as they cannot always meet attendance expectations.
 - b. CDDs legislative report on this issue indicated it would cost just under \$250,000 for them to pay for the children who have attendance challenges
 - i. If CDD does not pay for that gap in attendance, we are asking small business providers to make up for that payment gap. ECE providers operate with tiny margins and struggle to make this work, even though they want to provide services to all.
 - ii. All other levels of ed are paid based on enrollment. Why are we asking ECE to be different?
 - c. This is creating an inefficiency in valuable teacher time
 - i. My centers must enter enrollment in a database for the Office of Head Start, in a separate spreadsheet for UPK, and make a third entry in a database for childcare subsidy.
2. The UPK Study recommended in S.56

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- a. The proposed study asks for information about the economic impacts on small business, private ECE providers. Please make sure that work is carried out.
 - i. Most providers lose money on infants and toddlers. They make up the difference with a profit on 3 and 4-year olds. If we reduce the number of 4-year olds they serve, we should find a way to make their business models work.
- b. Please add an addition to the study to look at impacts on the most vulnerable 4-year olds.
 - i. Head Start programs provide a depth of wrap around services that is not matched in school districts. We should look at how that reduced family support will impact our most vulnerable 4-year old Vermonters.

Thanks so much for asking for my input in this important work,

Christy Swenson

Co-Chair Vermont Head Start Association