

Families of Color Advisory Committee - House Human Services Testimony 4.18.23

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As Vermont's Child Care Campaign prepared to pass transformative legislation in 2023, Let's Grow Kids' policy team led work in partnership with many organizations, individuals, early educators, and policymakers to solidify details of the policy asks that will make child care affordable, equitable, accessible, and sustainable in Vermont. To ensure the final policy proposals were as strong as possible and met the needs of families of color in Vermont, LGK created an externally facilitated ECE Racial Equity Advisory Committee for BIPOC Vermonters to provide advice and feedback to the LGK policy team.

Since June last year, 8 BIPOC parents, a few of whom are also EC educators and leaders, have come together to share their stories of childcare and early childhood education across Vermont, and to review and provide feedback on the core elements of LGK's policy proposals for the coming years. Today we are joined by three members of this Racial Equity Advisory Committee: Ilia Gilligan, Brittany Watson, and Kiona Heath, who also serves as the group's facilitator. We're grateful for the time we have with you this morning to briefly share a summary of the themes that emerged from our group, and how these findings connect directly to the proposals in S.56.

I. We believe high quality ECE programs reflect the strengths and values of our communities and the uniqueness of Vermont.

- In a high quality ECE system, BIPOC families will see their cultures (ie: food, music, storytelling) reflected and celebrated in their ECE environments.
- In a high quality ECE system children will have access to the natural world and a connection to the land they are on in programs that value environmental stewardship.
- In a high quality ECE system transparency and communication are key. BIPOC families want to be in ongoing conversation with their ECE programs and hear regularly about the resources dedicated to meeting their households' unique needs.

(Kiona) I am a parent of two children living in Chittenden County. We are full time working parents in our household and our youngest is in kindergarten, so our family has spent the last 8 years fully immersed and dependent upon our childcare and preschool programs.

We were fortunate to receive a spot in our town's only childcare center and preschool when we started having children, which currently has a long waitlist (250+), and which would be considered high quality by any metric - ample outdoor space and time, Reggio Emilia-inspired play, learning and care, classes that encourage connection and community among families, and experienced and knowledgeable teachers, many of whom at this point we consider family.

And though it was a stressor, we were also very fortunate to be able to absorb the steady and significant increase in tuition costs, cost increases that were necessary for paying our teachers a close to livable wage and maintaining a high quality educational environment.

I am certain that my children were nurtured, supported, and deeply cared for by many in their ECE program. And like most other BIPOC families, we encountered significant disconnect, erasure, and bias along the way. At one point, a particularly harmful experience with a teacher pushed us to consider leaving our beloved preschool, but finding another local program of comparable quality and with availability proved impossible.

So instead of being pushed out of our incredibly well supported ECE community we put in a substantial amount of time and energy, and asked for a substantial amount of time and energy from our school administrators, to work through some very difficult conversations and to leverage the resources they had available to make sure the preschool was safe, and welcoming to our son.

The truth is in order to sustain a responsive and high-quality ECE program, with well prepared educators, with accessible outdoor space, with a socially and culturally minded approach to programming, and with the ability to work through the unique needs of all families in their communities - early childhood education programs need more money than can be expected from increased tuition costs.

The components of S.56 that support this vision are reflected in the proposed expansion to the Child Care Financial Assistance Program, especially the proposal to provide payment to early childhood education programs based on the cost of providing high-quality care. With increased state investment, programs will be paid based on rates that allow them to provide nutritious, culturally appropriate food and materials, to create and maintain outdoor spaces, to invest in technology and community-building to support consistent communication with families, and to invest in the staff in programs who make all of this come to life. Please ensure that the scope of investment and change is sufficient to provide ECE programs the necessary funding to support our families in this way.

II. Teachers are at the center of our experiences.

- A high quality ECE system will have BIPOC teachers and leaders recruited, supported, and well compensated within the ECE workforce.
- We are most confident in, comfortable with, and excited about the care our children receive when we are confident, comfortable with and excited about their specific teachers and care providers in our families lives.
- Affordability affects families and teachers alike. The lack of affordable childcare, lack of affordable housing and inadequate wages in Vermont makes it impossible to pull in the top-tier BIPOC early childhood caregivers, educators, and leaders who are necessary for a high-quality childcare system for our children.

(IIia) High quality childcare is almost impossible to obtain in Vermont, and if a family is able to find a spot in childcare, the cost is almost always astronomical and therefore unattainable for parents, specifically BIPOC parents. I have worked in early childhood education for the past ten years; I began as an assistant and worked my way up the ladder and became a director. In December of 2021 I was working as an Executive Director at a preschool in Burlington when I had my daughter, Penelope. The position as ED was overwhelming as we (teachers and administrators alike) were overworked, underpaid and underappreciated. I was working over 55 hours a week before and during my pregnancy and refused to do so once I had my daughter, even though I was given a 50% tuition discount.

In October of 2022, I left the ECE field because it was no longer sustainable for my family. Then came the bigger issue, if I am no longer employed at a preschool, how is my family supposed to afford childcare? When I said the cost of childcare is astronomical, I wasn't exaggerating. It costs approximately \$16,000 per year for a child ages six weeks through one year; for comparison, when I attended college at Northern Vermont University, my tuition each year was \$10,000. Even with my husband working full time for the government and whichever position I had, we could not afford full time, or even part time childcare, and many families are in the same position where they do not qualify for assistance, but still cannot afford to send their children to childcare. Luckily enough, when I was searching for a childcare slot, a new center in Colchester called Little Saplings Preschool (that is teacher owned and operated) was in need of a Director which worked out perfectly as now I have a job in the field that I love WITH sustainable hours that together we are creating a high-quality AFFORDABLE early education childcare center.

S.56 proposes to expand CCFAP to make child care affordable for more families, and it importantly creates a compensation scale to ensure that early childhood educators are well compensated and able to remain in the profession. This is important, and so is investing in professional preparation programs for early childhood educators to create pathways for people to enter and advance in the field. We would like to see an additional focus on creating a diverse early childhood workforce so that our children are more likely to have early educators who understand our families' experiences and our children's unique needs.

III. Safe, affordable, high quality child care is necessary for our survival in this state. BIPOC families need this resource to live here and to stay here.

- Experiences of bias and harm have led to fear when sharing the unique needs of BIPOC families in Vermont. We have to trust that the state *wants* us here and sees value in retaining the BIPOC community.
- The affordability of quality childcare is intrinsically linked to the affordability of living in Vermont. We consider housing costs and childcare costs as tapping into the same family resources.
- The lack of availability and the burden of ECE costs has multi-generational and community wide impact. We rely on our extended families and other BIPOC community

members for help with childcare since they have shared understanding and lived experiences.

- Universal approaches are not necessarily equitable approaches. BIPOC families face additional discrimination and barriers to living and raising children in Vermont. We need funding specifically allocated to BIPOC families for childcare costs.
- We are in Vermont for a high quality of life in alignment with our values - but many of us have considered leaving the state for some place more financially sustainable and culturally aligned.

(Britaney) I found it difficult to find adequate child care in Vermont, the process was overwhelming. I used the bright futures website per the advice of the local parent child center. I felt my heart sink as I went through the list of childcare options near me, clicking on each option one at a time to learn there were no openings. I observed some centers had not updated their lists in months. I followed up with the local parent child center, who informed me that I would need to call each childcare center as the bright futures site was not fully up to date. I then went back through the list calling childcare facilities, confirming that there were no openings for my baby. I was told I could put my child on a wait list, with no clear idea of when a spot could be available. I was frustrated with the failure of our system. In addition to this problem, I already had worries about sending my infant baby to daycare with people I didn't know, and staff and other children that did not look like me or my child.

Racism is a real issue in Vermont. I worked with children and families in a former job, and remember having to pick up a child I worked with at a registered home childcare to bring that child to an appointment. When I arrived at that childcare, I immediately noted the confederate flag on display at the front of the home. I took a picture and sent it to some of my trusted colleagues and a family member as I was scared to enter the home, and wanted to ensure people knew my whereabouts if something happened to me. When I entered the home, there was an overwhelmingly unpleasant odor, with multiple animals and a seeming lack of space for children. I remember questioning how this home could be a childcare.

Fortunately a lot of progress has been made since then in improving the quality of home childcare programs, but unfortunately our society has not progressed in terms of the experiences of racism for BIPOC Vermonters. My experience with that home childcare made it imperative for my children to attend a childcare center. As no options were available for my baby, I began having my family from overseas come to America to watch my baby on a rotating basis of 3-6 months at a time. I paid for each family member's flight and compensated them for their time with my child. I flew my family in and out of the nearest international airport, two hours away. I used this arrangement for the first two years of my baby's life. I had no other option but to put my oldest child (preschool age) in a childcare center that was not my first or second choice due to the lack of availability of spots in my desired childcare center. When a spot did open, I moved my oldest child to my desired childcare center. This move allowed my youngest to be prioritized on the waitlist and they began attending within several months of my oldest. My child was the only child of color in their class, and did not have a BIPOC teacher.

I now have two nieces that are in need of care, and I cannot step up to have them in my home solely because of childcare costs and availability.

Affordable, high quality and inclusive child care is essential for BIPOC survival in Vermont. We must feel confident that our children are safe when they are out of our presence in a setting where they belong.

We appreciate the focus on creating more affordability for families in S.56. You can strengthen the bill by building on the proposed expansion of Child Care Financial Assistance to include a set-aside for BIPOC families. During the pandemic, the Office of Racial Equity worked with the state to provide BIPOC-specific vaccination and testing programs that were successful. A similar approach should be embedded within CCFAP expansion so that resources are available to reach BIPOC Vermonters and support us to access ECE programs. This should be in addition to the Non-Citizen Child Care Assistance Program, which we were happy to see in the bill.

Additionally, it is important to support a broad range of program types since different families and children will have different needs for what feels most safe and welcoming. We urge you to ensure that programs of all kinds - including home-based programs and centers - have the resources to be high-quality and are able to thrive and serve all children throughout their early childhood years. S.56 takes important steps to include all programs equally in CCFAP expansion so they have access to resources and professional development.

Thank you.

From Kiona during questions:

- The committee is finalizing its work on this bill and perhaps as of yet has not clearly carved out a set aside for BIPOC families or language that would require specific outreach and support for BIPOC families who need EC care and education.
- It is an all too common story to have BIPOC, specifically black people and communities ask for resources to be allocated directly to them in an effort to create more protective factors, to decrease barriers, and to right the wrongs of resources historically and currently being extracted from those people and communities - income disparities and discrimination, healthcare disparities and discrimination, housing disparities and discrimination - as a black mother these things cost us money. Money that is clearly needed to access safe and nurturing environments for our children.