

Dear Legislative Partners,

There is no more important step in ensuring a robust and high quality Early Childhood Education system than creating an avenue for sustained and appropriate public investment. Vermont's landmark Act 76 has taken dramatic steps in creating this in a way that no other state in our country has been able to achieve. As an Early Childhood Educator myself, I continue to see the impacts of what high quality educational environments can do to support the development of children as well as strengthen families.

My role is the Director of Early Childhood Education for the Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union, I help to support our UPK partners in the community and oversee over 120 children receiving Early Childhood Special education service (ECSE). ECSE services by statute are carried out in the child's natural environment and this often means seeing children in community early childhood settings. Children make the most gains when they have targeted services from trained professionals as well as supported carryover of skill development by their regular caregivers. Early childhood settings need to be more and more prepared to support these children, which often means increased staffing for children's needs, ability to provide release time for meetings and consultation and time for professional learning to support children's needs.

Act 76 has just begun to show its impacts on the programs who care for young children. Pulling back any funding at this point is shortsighted. I have seen the beginnings of great change in the capacity and quality of the Early Childhood programs in our Bennington Community, but we have only just begun in making use of funding and increasing quality. There are many steps that are happening alongside the increased public funding, like the overhaul and improvement of our STARS (Step Ahead Recognition System) and the Early MTSS initiative which need time to continue to impact change. Using funding to increase wages and increase the number of staff hired in programs will all help make more and more programs accessible for a diverse population of children.

When considering the Governor's budget proposal for FY26 please take into consideration the work that has only begun to improve Vermont's ECE System. Redirecting \$20 million dollars may seem like an appropriate way to solve an immediate problem we have in balancing the budget, but it will take an undue toll on a system that has been drastically underfunded for decades. I thank you for your time and consideration in this matter and look forward to the good work our state can continue to do in the future.

Sincerely,
Meghan Meszkat, M.Ed.