

**Rev. Sharon Easterling
387 Graham Road
Chester, Vermont 05143**

February 19, 2025

House and Senate Appropriations Committees
Vermont State House
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

Dear Committee Members:

As a lifelong early childhood education advocate and more recent resident of southern Vermont, I am writing to share my perspective on Governor Scott's FY26 State Budget proposal; specifically on the recommendation to re-purpose funds raised through Act 76 Child Care Legislation for non-child care use.

For most of my professional career I worked in Philadelphia and at the Pennsylvania state level to improve public sector support for high quality early childhood education. As an ordained Baptist minister, I oversaw programs for children and youth in some of the poorest neighborhoods in Philadelphia. I witnessed firsthand what longitudinal research tells us, that breaking the cycle of poverty and educational disenfranchisement is most effectively accomplished in the preschool years.

In 2016 I retired from that work and moved to Chester Vermont, in part because the culture and policies of this state align so closely with my core values (and I love snow!). I continued to work as a consultant at the national level, advising state leaders in Arizona, Iowa, Virginia, and others, on building strong statewide ECE systems. I can say with confidence that Vermont is a true leader among states in advancing this work – by addressing quality, access, and affordability in the largest sector of the early childhood system, child care.

At the core of building a strong early childhood system is Act 76 – which ensures that the state's investment, added to the federal share of funding will both increase financial assistance for parents struggling to afford child care, and provide resources to programs to address compensation for early childhood educators, alleviating the critical shortage of teachers in the sector.

This nascent and innovative strategy is just beginning to bear fruit in the state. For the first time in many years, more programs are opening or adding new seats to meet the pressing shortage and more families are able to afford quality programs with financial assistance from

the state. This, combined with the effort to implement professional licensure for ECE educators led by Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (on whose board I serve) – Vermont is poised to become the model state for early childhood education systems. To divert funds away from child care at this juncture with so many unmet needs, will have a chilling impact on the progress we have made.

I ask you to protect Act 76 funding and ensure that every dollar committed is used to address the needs of the early childhood system. Funds that support high quality child care settings for families lay a strong foundation for future success in school and in life for all of Vermont's children – and an investment in our future.

Thank you for your leadership, and all that has been accomplished to this end. I appreciate your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Rev. Sharon Easterling

Chester, Vermont