

Testimony on S.206
House Committee on Government Relations
April 10, 2026

Trisha Scharf
Owner and Executive Director
Children Unlimited
Williston, Vermont

Dear Chair Birong and Members of the Committee:

I am the owner and executive director of Children Unlimited, a private early childhood education program in Williston. In my role, I hire, train, and support early childhood educators and see firsthand the challenges our field faces in recruiting and retaining qualified staff. I support the Office of Professional Regulation's recommendations for establishing a system of licensure for early childhood educators.

For years, this field has struggled to recruit and retain educators because people can earn more working in retail or fast food than they can educating young children, without the training requirements or the enormous responsibility that comes with nurturing and supporting our youngest children and their families. Historically, early childhood education has not been taken seriously. It has been underpaid and dismissed as babysitting or "women's work." When professionals can earn more elsewhere with less responsibility, it becomes very difficult to recruit and retain educators or encourage them to pursue additional qualifications.

Yet we know from brain science that the early years are a period of tremendous learning and development. This is education in the truest sense. We also know from scientific research that the quality of early interactions is what makes or breaks children's ability to set a good foundation for their future learning and success in life. For this reason, we need a workforce that is educated and experienced.

In my experience working with people entering this field, the clarity of a profession matters. When there is a clear path for advancement, more people see early childhood education as a viable career. Licensure provides that clarity. It establishes consistent standards and recognizes the expertise required to do this work well.

The Office of Professional Regulation has recognized that it makes sense to license the professionals who work with young children. Their recommendation for an independent standards board would allow early childhood educators to participate in self-governance, applying consistent competencies and professional standards based on our expertise. Like nurses and other licensed professionals, early childhood educators carry tremendous responsibility. We care for and educate children at one of the most critical stages of their development, when the foundation for future learning and well-being is being formed.

This proposal also builds on the significant investments Vermont has already made in the early childhood workforce, from the promise of increased compensation and benefits through Act 76 to the many years of work in higher education to align preparation programs. Licensure will bring consistency in qualifications, support career mobility, and make it easier to recruit educators from other states. Currently, each state has its own standards, which creates barriers to hiring. Establishing a clear, professional system of licensure is long overdue and has the potential to be a true game changer for this field.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Trisha Scharf
Owner and Executive Director
Children Unlimited
Williston, Vermont