

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Christine Birong-Smith, I am a non-profit, Universal PreK classroom teacher at Lincoln Cooperative Preschool in Lincoln, Vermont. I hold a birth through PreK Vermont state Level II professional teaching license and two master's degrees, one of which is in Early Childhood Education. I would qualify for an ECE III, I do not qualify for Vermont NEA representation, despite being qualified to teach in public schools. S.206 would provide me with an additional form of recognition and professional representation. I encourage you to support the ECE III's inclusion in S.206.

I am here to speak to S.206, specifically in regard to costs and program support. To do that effectively, I will first briefly talk about Act 76. Under Act 76, early childhood education programs were not required to use the increased funding that was provided through higher reimbursement rates and expanded eligibility to raise wages, but many did. I am a teacher in one such program that chose to allocate funds in this way, and it has contributed greatly to my financial security. In sum, early childhood education is seeing wages increase in the field, and I am one example of this. S.206 builds on that progress by adding a layer of accountability to ensure those public investments are delivering the intended results.

Importantly, we do *not* expect S.206 to increase the cost of child care for families. If anything, this legislation may generate savings for the state by streamlining regulations and improving systems within the Child Development Division for determining qualifications.

There are also strong, thoughtful measures in place to support Family Child Care providers. Two key amendments strengthen this bill in this way—one to protect the current workforce, and another to support future providers.

The first is the creation of a Family Child Care Provider License that acts as a legacy pathway, ensuring that anyone operating a family child care program as of January 1, 2029, can continue their work without disruption, effectively allowing them to be grandfathered.

The second is that the bill establishes a conditional license for future providers. This allows individuals to open a home-based family child care with an ECE I license, while giving them *six years* to obtain an ECE II license. This strikes a balance between maintaining program quality and ensuring the pathway into the profession remains accessible.

It's also important to note that there are already incentives in place to support professional growth. Career Ladder Recognition Bonuses provide wage supplements to early childhood educators who increase their qualifications, reinforcing a system that rewards advancement and continued education.

In addition, the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children is currently administering the Foundation Forward Pilot. This innovative, cohort-based model supports experienced early childhood educators in beginning their college education through Assessment for Prior Learning. The program is *free* and includes mentoring, technology support, and

dedicated guidance for early educators. On average, participants earn 30 college credits, and it has been especially appealing to Family Child Care providers.

Together, these efforts reflect a coordinated approach: investing in the workforce, supporting providers at every stage, and ensuring accountability for public dollars.

For these reasons, I respectfully encourage you to support S.206 and continue building a stronger, professional, and more sustainable early childhood education system for Vermont.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to Vermont.