

Hello, my name is Jennifer Olson and I'm a Co-Teaching Director at Quarry Hill School in Middlebury. I have been teaching for 18 years in private, center based programs. I've spent approximately half of those years working with infants and toddlers, and the other half with preschoolers. I've also mentored students in UVM's Early Childhood Education undergraduate program, Vermont's Higher Education Collaborative program and have been actively engaged with the initiative to advance ECE as a profession over the last several years. I have a Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education and a Master's Degree in Educational Leadership. I'm also a parent of a 3 year old and live in Hinesburg.

Thank you for taking the time to hear from me today.

I am here to express my full support for bill S.206 to create a licensed profession of early childhood education in Vermont. Professional recognition is critical for standing up an early childhood education system that centers equity for children, families and educators. This bill can actually **simplify** regulations, and makes the system easier for early childhood educators to navigate while simultaneously making it easier for families to understand educator qualifications.

Since 2019 I have been a member of the Advancing ECE as a Profession Taskforce here in Vermont. This has involved being in collaboration with early childhood educators from center based programs and family child care homes the whole time. This bill truly is a **grassroots effort** to ask for what we want & for what we believe is most beneficial to children and families. I became a member of the taskforce because I believe professional licensure can strengthen the ECE system, ensuring that there are qualified educators for the children of today and tomorrow. The process has been incredibly affirming. I have been in countless meetings with educators from around the state from multiple settings to talk about professionalization, to think critically about the future of our workforce and the ECE ecosystem that supports young children and families. These meetings have been a space for honest dialogue and reflection about key aspects of what it would take to professionalize. As a taskforce, we have continually brought back what we captured from these conversations with the workforce, **to** the workforce - ensuring that we are hearing them correctly & amplifying our collective voice. We have made sure that we will be bringing **everyone** along. This is so important.

If you haven't heard already - there are currently a myriad of ways in which early childhood educators enter the field and hold qualifications. It's muddy to say the least. I received my undergraduate degree from UVM in Early Childhood Education. As a licensed program, graduates submit a portfolio to demonstrate their competency recommending them for licensure through the Agency of Education with an endorsement in Early Childhood Education, allowing them to be a lead teacher in classrooms from birth to Grade 3. So I've had that license for 18 years now, and always chosen to work in private center based programs that align with my teaching philosophy and values.

This AOE licensure enables me to be a Prek Teacher and the preschool program I am at, at any given time, to be a Universal Prek Partner. I demonstrate competency and professional growth through licensure renewal. It's easy to communicate my qualifications to potential employers and prospective families.

But the reality is that the majority of center based teachers and family child care home providers *do not* hold AOE licensure. And for them, there is no shared system or common language to demonstrate qualifications. That makes it difficult for programs to communicate quality to families and difficult for educators to understand

and navigate career pathways. When we regulate educators by the same standards regardless of whether they work at home, in a center, or at a school, we shift the focus to *what truly matters*: the competencies educators **need** to serve young children.

As a center-based director, professional licensure streamlines the hiring process. Currently, hiring involves carefully combing through a teacher's resume or CV to consider their qualifications based on their education, experience, and professional development. It can include aligning those with the career ladder if the individual hasn't done so already. These steps are essential to determining **if** the individual is indeed qualified for the teaching position. Licensure would change that. We would be able to look at their designation of their license, and quickly determine if they are qualified for the position. The rest of the details remain important to informing the interview process, a goodness of fit, etc, and if hired, in supporting them with access to meaningful professional development opportunities that further their goals. And that last part is part of retention. As center-directors and colleagues we want to strengthen the quality of our programs and field by retaining our teachers, by building pipelines that encourage and facilitate teachers entering at all levels to feel supported and challenged throughout their career.

Professional licensure also creates a system of individual accountability. Currently, if there is a violation reported by CDD, it's on the program, not the individual, despite the fact that the violation may have been specific to the actions of one staff member. That individual can leave the program and go work somewhere else, potentially repeating the same actions in a new environment, affecting more children and families. Professional licensure ensures that cannot happen as the records would be tied to the individual, protecting children in new communities against the potential threat of harm. Individual licensure makes certain that educators abide by an ethical code of conduct.

Licensure also breaks down barriers for prospective families by simplifying the way we articulate qualifications of staff to potential families, which in turn allows families to make informed decisions about the care of their child.

Let me give you an example. Currently, as a center based director, we're thinking about how to market ourselves for prospective families. We recognize the importance of articulating our staff's qualifications. And it's incredibly challenging to do so succinctly when that would mean capturing the different pathways and qualifications of our 6 teachers. Now imagine I was working for a larger program with upwards of 30 staff; that task is daunting if not impossible. In many cases it forces the hands of center directors to share little or nothing about staff qualifications. Nuanced conversations with prospective families may happen during tours, but even then it's hard to explain in plain language. The designations put forward in S.206, ECE I,II,III can become as well known to the general public as those in the nursing profession, like CNA, LNP, & RN. That would be a tremendously positive shift for families and educators alike.

Now I'm going to take off my director hat and put on my parent hat. I mentioned that I have a child, he's 3.5 and his name is Wesley. Let's rewind 4ish years. I'm newly pregnant & hoping to return to teaching after my maternity leave. I begin looking for child care. I'm searching through website after website - only to find that a few out of a dozen nearby programs say anything about their staff. I comb through their bios trying to figure out what I can. In this moment I feel so grateful that I know this system as an insider - it's like deciphering a coded language AND I also feel so frustrated that this is the reality for children and families. As parents, we deserve

more. We deserve to have enough information to make an informed decision about who is going to care for our child during the most critical window of their development.

I'm here today because what I want is for the 8,000 early childhood educators in Vermont who currently have no system of individual regulation—and for everyone considering this career in the future—to be supported by clear career pathways, accountability, and transparency through individual licensure under OPR. Our child care system is *vital* to this state, and it deserves a *strong, stable* workforce.

I've never walked into a hospital, doctors office, or other healthcare setting unsure of the qualifications or credentials of the professionals treating my son. I want that same confidence when I walk into an early childhood program—regardless of the setting.

I want to know that the educators are highly qualified, well compensated, and accountable. Professionalizing the early childhood education workforce gives families that assurance, and it gives educators the recognition they deserve for the work they do.

Thank you.