



# **KING STREET CENTER**

## **Testimony on S.206**

House Committee on Government Operations & Military Affairs

Presented by Shabnam Nolan, Executive Director of King Street Center

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Shabnam Nolan, and I serve as the Executive Director of King Street Center in Burlington.

At King Street Center, we serve children as young as 18 months through high school, alongside their families. Our early childhood program is not just a place for care. It is where children build trust, language, identity, and a sense of belonging that shapes their trajectory. It is also a Head Start program, meaning every toddler and preschool slot serves Head Start families.

We hold that responsibility with deep care. And I want to begin by saying clearly: we believe early childhood educators deserve to be recognized and supported as professionals. They deserve clear pathways for advancement and compensation that reflects the critical role they play.

At the same time, the field is in crisis. Just in the last month, three preschool classrooms in Burlington have closed due to staffing shortages. As we consider policies to professionalize the workforce, we must be careful not to unintentionally create barriers that further reduce the number of people able to enter and stay in the field.

This is especially important for immigrant communities, who are critical to Vermont's future workforce. Many already face barriers related to language, credential recognition, and access to higher education. We need to ensure policy does not deepen those barriers.

From our perspective as an organization operating classrooms every day, I want to offer five key considerations as you advance this bill.

### **1. Preserve Accessible Entry Points into the Workforce**

Our ability to serve children depends on our ability to build a workforce in a constrained labor market.

At King Street, our classrooms are staffed by a mix of experienced educators and emerging professionals. Many enter the field through accessible pathways, and we invest in their growth over time while they are already contributing meaningfully in the classroom.

What has not worked for us is hiring solely based on degrees without cultural understanding or real-world experience. A degree alone does not ensure an educator meets the needs of our community.

Flexibility in hiring is what allows our workforce to reflect the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the families we serve. That representation is foundational to children's sense of belonging and development.

While S.206 does not explicitly require licensure at the point of hire, there is ambiguity about whether programs will still be able to hire individuals that do not start with a license and support them in working toward credentials over time.

This ambiguity matters. Without flexible entry points, we risk narrowing the pipeline into a field that is already struggling to staff classrooms.

## **2. Support People and Programs During Credential Advancement**

It is currently unclear what support will exist for programs as educators pursue credentials.

When an educator leaves the classroom for coursework or training, we still need to meet ratios, maintain continuity for children, and run stable classrooms.

This creates a real tension:

- We want to invest in our staff
- But we cannot remove them without backfill
- And backfill is extremely difficult to find

This is also a significant cost. Supporting credentialing requires substitute staff, overtime, schedule adjustments, and absorbing gaps when roles cannot be filled.

There is also a lack of clarity around licensure or other requirements for substitutes and temporary staff. If a lead teacher is out working toward credentials, who can step into that role? Will substitutes need the same licensure?

Without clarity and support, programs may not be able to maintain safe staffing.

If this bill moves forward, it is critical that the state invest in:

- Substitute and float staffing capacity
- Paid release time for educators
- Direct resources to programs to maintain classroom stability

Professionalizing the workforce cannot come at the cost of destabilizing classrooms.

## **3. Ensure Implementation is Financially and Operationally Feasible**

As credential expectations increase, there is an expectation that compensation will increase as well. But the bill does not address how programs will absorb those costs.

Early childhood programs already operate on thin margins. Without sustained investment, it is unclear how we would meet higher standards while also offering higher wages.

At King Street, Act 76 allowed us to increase salaries significantly. That helped move educators from far below a reasonable wage to a more sustainable one. But those gains do not position us to absorb additional increases without new funding.

And while we may be able to increase fundraising to help offset costs, most early childhood programs cannot.

These are real, ongoing expenses. Without additional investment, these requirements risk becoming barriers rather than supports.

## **4. Do Not Lose an Inclusive and Representative Workforce**

At King Street, many of our educators come from the same communities as the children we serve, including immigrant and refugee families. This is essential, not incidental.

Children benefit deeply when they see themselves reflected in their teachers, in race, in class, in life experiences. And this is just as true in rural Vermont communities as it is in Vermont's immigrant communities.

I want to share a brief example. One of our staff members holds a bachelor's degree in psychology from her home country and has prior teaching experience. Because her degree cannot easily be verified, she is currently working as an aide.

She is an exceptional educator. And for the young girls in our program who wear hijabs, seeing her in the classroom creates an immediate sense of belonging.

Her role is not a reflection of her ability. It is a reflection of system barriers.

While Vermont has a process for recognizing foreign credentials, it often requires costly evaluations, extensive documentation, and additional coursework. These barriers can make it difficult for educators to translate prior experience into recognized credentials.

We need to ask:

- Will prior education be recognized?
- Will there be accessible pathways to meet requirements?
- Or will we unintentionally turn away strong educators?

We must also consider language access. If pathways depend on navigating systems independently in English, that creates additional barriers, not just for those where English is not their primary language, but also for those incredibly strong educators who may not have collegiate level understanding of the English language.

As we strengthen the profession, we must ensure we are not narrowing who has access to it.

## **5. Build in Equity Review**

We all share the same goal: to elevate this field and invest in educators.

But implementation matters. Good intentions do not guarantee good outcomes.

We recommend building an equity review into the policy:

- Ongoing evaluation of workforce diversity and access
- Monitoring of how requirements impact entry into the field

We should also be engaging directly with staff in programs across the state and not just a few directors of programs. This is a major shift in the field, and it should be informed by those operating classrooms every day.

## **Closing**

This bill has a strong vision, and it is one we support.

But if we move forward without addressing workforce entry pathways, classroom stability, and equitable access, we risk unintended consequences that could reduce access for children and families.

With thoughtful adjustments and meaningful investment, this can be both a strong and sustainable path forward.

Thank you for your time, your leadership, and your commitment to Vermont's children and families. I am happy to continue this conversation and serve as a resource.