



Date: Thursday, April 30, 2026
To: House Human Services Committee
From: Emilie Tenenbaum, Executive Director, LGKAN
Re: S.206 – Early Childhood Educator Profession Bill

Good morning. For the record, my name is Emilie Tenenbaum, and I'm the Executive Director of Let's Grow Kids Action Network. I am also a parent of 3 young children, the youngest is currently in child care in a Pre-K 4 classroom. Today, I am here to voice my support for S.206, the Early Childhood Educator Profession Bill. As a parent I want our early educators to have the support they need to thrive and I want to ensure more early educators enter the field so families across this state can access quality child care. In my role with LGKAN, and through my work with Let's Grow Kids before this, I can tell you the field needs this bill – they have been asking for professional recognition for years, so let's make sure we pass it this session.

But before I make the case for S.206, I'd like to first do a quick recap of where we've been and how far we've come. Under the leadership of Chair Wood and many others at this table, this committee has long been at the forefront of our child care care progress in Vermont. In 2021, we worked together on H.171, now referred to as Act 45, which set the foundation for equitable, affordable, high-quality child care in Vermont. This law laid out the goals for a future system where:

- No family spends more than 10% of their household income on child care;
- All families with young children have affordable access to high-quality child care and early education; and where
- Vermont's early childhood educators are fairly compensated and well-supported.

As part of Act 45, legislative leaders put into motion an official financing report by an external expert. Fast forward to 2023. The RAND Corporation publishes their Early Care and Education Financing Study which confirmed:

a child care system where every child has access to quality child care, where families spend no more than 10% of their income, and where early childhood educators are fairly compensated, was within reach.

The 2023 legislative session proved to be a historic one for child care in Vermont. This committee once again took a leadership role in crafting historic child care legislation, and the law we now know as Act 76 took effect.

Now, we are in the second full year of implementation of Act 76, which is making significant public investment in Vermont's child care system. I'm happy to report that we are already seeing a tremendous return on that investment in such a short time. More families can afford care, more programs are opening and expanding - especially in rural communities, some of which are seeing their first ever child care program open - and more Vermonters can participate in the workforce because child care is more accessible.

Currently, nearly **10,000 families** across the state are receiving child care financial assistance. For many families after Act 76, this has meant saving hundreds or even thousands of dollars each month. Vermont has also made progress on capacity: over the last two years, over **100 new programs have opened and we've added 1,200 spaces.**

We are also seeing growth in Vermont's early childhood workforce, which has increased by more than **8 percent, now totaling over 8,000 educators.** Family child care homes are a critical part of that workforce—especially in rural communities—and their ability to grow and sustain their businesses is directly tied to this new investment and whether our state will continue to invest in this sector. It allows these small businesses to make decisions like adding a teacher or other supports that allow our educators and kids to thrive. After years of decline, these programs are beginning to rebound which is very notable considering other places around the country are seeing a decline.

These are meaningful outcomes in a very short time that show Vermont's long-term approach to child care is working.

But continued progress means full implementation of Act 76. And the data shows where we need to go next. A gap remains between available high-quality child care spaces and what Vermont families with young

children need. Programs across the state continue to report that they cannot expand because they cannot hire and retain enough educators.

The early childhood workforce shortage is now the primary barrier to child care access in Vermont, and S.206 is a direct response to that challenge.

For nearly a decade, Vermont has been working to strengthen early childhood education as a profession – driven by the workforce itself.

We needed everyone’s perspective and voice to be heard as part of the conversation – and we needed the voices of the profession itself to be front and center. Between 2018 and 2022, more than 1,000 educators from both family child care homes and centers shaped recommendations for a unified professional identity, qualifications, and licensure. The Office of Professional Regulation independently reviewed and affirmed those recommendations which after their own Sunrise Report, which you have heard about in detail, legislation was drafted. S. 206 is the latest version of this legislation, which passed the Senate with bipartisan support, reflecting strong agreement on this workforce-informed solution.

This committee laid the groundwork. Act 45 and Act 76 set a clear goal: early childhood educators should be compensated on par with peers in other fields. Act 76 contained legislative intent language acknowledging the need for continued progress on increasing early childhood educators’ wages. Act 76 investments have moved us forward by raising CCFAP reimbursement rates, but we’re not there yet. As you’ve heard in recent testimony, program directors continue to struggle to recruit and retain staff, and wages still lag behind comparable professions. Stagnation will kill any progress we have made under Act 76.

Continued incremental increases to CCFAP reimbursement rates are essential to raising wages, retaining the current workforce, and attracting new educators. Since the passage of Act 76 the Legislature has continued to make small investments to incrementally increase CCFAP rates. We will continue to need those incremental increases in the future. **At the same time, the professional licensure framework in S.206 is critical to recognize the expertise of this field, create clear pathways for entry and advancement, and ensure accountability for this level of public investment.**

Right now, professional requirements for early childhood education vary across settings, making it difficult for both educators and employers to understand what qualifications are needed for different roles and leaves parents unsure of the qualifications for the educators in the classrooms. S.206 creates a streamlined system with transparent and consistent expectations, allowing educators to move more easily between positions and to different programs, while giving programs the information they need to make the best hires. **This bill is a necessary step to ensure this workforce continues to attract new talent, create jobs in our rural communities and retain the amazing early educators that are already doing this critical work.**

There are questions about how changes like this impact the current workforce. From day one, the number one concern about increasing qualifications has been avoiding unintended consequences, such as driving people out of the field or causing program closures. This bill was designed with that in mind, and it has been continually changed and updated when we heard concerns to ensure we are getting it right. It includes an eight-year, phased implementation timeline and creates pathways for current educators to meet new qualifications over time. The goal is to retain and strengthen the workforce, not shrink it. And I want to reiterate here, that the supports and timeline in the bill were designed and vetted by the early childhood workforce.

This bill is also about accountability. Vermont has made a significant public investment in child care, and with increased investment comes increased accountability. Licensure is a standard way to provide that accountability, ensuring that the people caring for and educating Vermont's youngest children meet clear, consistent qualifications across settings.

I know a lot of us are especially concerned about family child care home programs. I grew up in rural Vermont and spent my early years in family child care settings—my parents relied on that care to work and we were lucky enough to have some amazing programs where I had a good experience. In Vermont's rural communities, family child care homes are the backbone of the system: small businesses that are deeply rooted in their communities and often the only option for families. When child care is available, parents can work; when it's not, local businesses feel it immediately. Individual professional licensure creates a system where opportunities for family child care educators are the same as opportunities for center-based educators. At its core, this bill is about equal opportunity

and resources for both educators and our youngest kids regardless of where they live. Strengthening the workforce through S.206 helps ensure that family child care homes in rural Vermont can continue to grow and serve their communities. Concerns about the way the bill impacts rural communities were raised in the Senate. The bill was adjusted to make it even more clear in this area. The bill includes longer transitions for family child care providers and provides exemptions for people currently running family child care programs to address these concerns.

Long-term public investment is helping programs grow and is improving the quality of early childhood education. But to meet the needs of families and Vermont businesses, we need more early childhood educators. **As I said before: we cannot be stagnant; our progress on child care as a state is not guaranteed.** It depends on strengthening the essential child care workforce and ensuring we have a healthy pipeline of professionals excited to enter the field of early childhood education.

I'll end with this: Throughout the last decade, early childhood educators were included in the three pillars of child care transformation: Affordability - Access - Quality. Their engagement, focusing on Vermont's children, has empowered this essential workforce. They believe it is now their turn, with S.206. They have seen the effects of the good policy this committee has helped create and are filled with hope that change is possible for them, as well. Even though there are questions and uncertainties, they also know something needs to be done. In the same way, Vermont has prioritized affordability and access and made progress on quality. We must not leave behind our early childhood educators who have asked for this legislation. By recognizing early childhood educators as the skilled professionals they are, creating clear career pathways, and aligning expectations across settings, this bill makes it possible to recruit and retain the workforce our child care system needs. Thank you for your time and consideration. I'm happy to answer any questions.