



KING STREET CENTER

Testimony on S.206

House Committee on Human Services

Presented by Shabnam Nolan, Executive Director of King Street Center

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

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 a place where children build trust, language, identity, and a sense of belonging that shapes their entire trajectory. It is also a Head Start program, meaning every slot in the toddler and preschool program are for Head Start participants.

That responsibility is something we hold with deep care. And it is why I want to begin by saying clearly that King Street Center believes that early childhood educators deserve to be recognized as professionals and supported as such. Our educators deserve recognition, clear pathways for advancement, and compensation that reflects the critical role they play in our communities.

Right now, the early childhood field is struggling with staffing, both across Vermont and the country. Three preschool classrooms in Burlington closed in just the last month. The crisis is still very much here. We need to be careful that as we recognize these educators as professionals through policy – I don't know a caregiver who already doesn't see them as such – that we do not unintentionally create barriers that will further reduce the number of people able to access this profession. Just as important, we must ensure that any policy choice we make today does not disproportionately impact our immigrant communities.

As we all know, our immigrant population is one of the few if not only growing populations in Vermont and they are critical to the future of Vermont's economy. They are essential to our programs and communities, and if we are not careful, we risk losing them in this profession, as many may face barriers around language, credential recognition, and access to higher education pathways.

As an organization operating every day in real classrooms with real workforce constraints, we want to offer some questions and considerations as you advance the bill..

1. We Must Preserve Accessible Entry Points into the Workforce

Today, our ability to serve children depends on our ability to be flexible to build and sustain a workforce in a constrained labor market.

At King Street Center, our early childhood classrooms are intentionally staffed by a mix of experienced educators and emerging professionals, individuals who bring both formal training and a deep, lived passion for working with young children. Many of our educators enter the field through accessible pathways, and we invest in their growth over time, supporting them in building credentials while they are already contributing meaningfully in the classroom.

What has not worked at King Street Center is hiring educators with a bachelor's degree in early childhood without any cultural understanding or real world experience. In other words, it has been our experience that a degree alone does not result in an educator that meets the needs of our community. Having flexibility in our approach to hiring is critical to ensuring our workforce reflects the cultural and linguistic background of the families we serve, which is foundational to children's sense of belonging and development.

While the bill does not explicitly require licensure at the point of hire, there is ambiguity in the language about whether programs will be able to continue hiring individuals and supporting them in working toward credentials, or whether credentialing will become an expectation to be hired.

We believe this ambiguity needs to be addressed before the bill advances because without flexible entry points into the workforce, we risk narrowing the pipeline into the field at a time when we are already struggling to staff classrooms. If programs are no longer able to hire educators on a plan to complete credentials over time, it will significantly limit who we can bring into the profession.

2. We Must Support People and Programs While Educators Advance Their Credentials

Right now, it is unclear whether there will be any support for organizations in this transition.

When an educator leaves the classroom to pursue coursework, training, or degree attainment, we still have to run the program.

We still need to meet ratios. We still need to ensure continuity for children. We still need to maintain safe, stable classrooms.

Without additional support, this creates a very real tension:

- We want to invest in our staff
- But we cannot remove them from the classroom without backfill
- And in today's workforce environment, that backfill is extremely difficult to find

This is not only a staffing challenge, it is a significant operational expense. At King Street Center, we already invest in our staff by providing paid time for credentialing, adjusting schedules, and backfilling classrooms when possible. That comes at a real cost to the organization. Covering classrooms while educators pursue credentials requires hiring substitute or float staff at additional cost, paying overtime or increasing hours for existing staff, absorbing productivity loss when positions cannot be filled.

In addition, S.206 does not clearly define how substitute or temporary staff will be treated under the new licensure structure. If a lead teacher is out of the classroom working toward credential attainment, who is able to step into that role? Will substitutes or float staff be required to hold the same level of licensure? Without clarity, programs may find themselves unable to identify qualified coverage, further straining already limited staffing capacity.

Beyond staffing, there is a broader financial reality that programs will face. As credential expectations increase, there seems to be an appropriate expectation that compensation will increase as well. However, the bill does not address how programs are expected to absorb those increased personnel costs. Early childhood programs are already operating on thin margins and without new, sustained investment, it is unclear how we would be able to both meet higher credentialing standards and offer wages that reflect those expectations.

Two years ago, King Street Center benefited greatly from Act 76 and used the increase in subsidy dollars exactly as it was intended, which was to increase salaries of our educators. That essentially helped us get

them from far too below a reasonable wage to a reasonable wage. It is unclear how we could do more at this point without further investment if the expectation or a state mandate will be to increase salaries further.

These are all real, ongoing operational expenses that programs are not currently resourced to absorb. And while King Street may be able to increase its fundraising efforts to address the rise in costs, most early childhood programs will not be able to as most do not utilize fundraising as part of their financial model.

If S.206 moves forward, it is critical that the state invest in:

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

Without significant investment by the state in both people and organizations, these requirements risk becoming barriers rather than supports. Professionalizing the workforce cannot come at the cost of destabilizing the classroom.

3. Ensuring an Inclusive and Representative Workforce

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

There is a tremendous benefit for children when they see themselves reflected in their teachers. Our programs are stronger when educators understand the cultural context, language, and lived experiences of the families we serve.

We want to raise a question for consideration:

How will S.206 impact the ability of immigrant community members to enter and remain in the early childhood workforce?

I'd like to share a story with you. One of our staff members, let's call her Sarah, holds a bachelor's degree in psychology from her home country and has prior teaching experience. However, because her degree cannot be easily verified through traditional systems, she is currently working as an aide. Sarah is a hard worker and great with our kids. The little girls who wear hijabs can look to Sarah and feel like they belong, because she wears a hijab. She is invaluable to the classroom and contributes to a stronger educational experience for our children.

Sarah being an aide is not a reflection of her ability. It is a reflection of the barriers within the system.

While Vermont has a process for recognizing foreign credentials through the Office of Professional Regulation, that process is not automatic and often requires costly third-party evaluations, extensive documentation, and additional coursework. For many educators, particularly those in early childhood, these barriers can make it difficult to translate prior education and experience into recognized credentials.

If we are looking to S.206 as a transformational bill to help us expand and retain a high quality workforce, then we should not leave this problem out of the solution. We should ensure that pathways for internationally trained educators are not only available, but accessible and realistic for the workforce this bill is intended to support.

For someone who has recently arrived in Vermont what will the pathway into early childhood education look like under this bill?

- Will their prior education be recognized?
- Will there be accessible, supported pathways to meet licensure requirements?
- Or will we unintentionally create barriers that turn away individuals who would otherwise be incredible educators?

Many immigrant educators did not go through the U.S. higher education system and requiring advancement through those systems as the only pathway to advancement in the field can create barriers that are not about their ability but about access.

We also need to consider language access. If English is not someone's first language, their ability to meet credentialing requirements may depend heavily on whether those pathways are supported by programs or expected to be completed independently. The latter would pose a serious barrier for this population.

As I stated in the beginning, immigrant communities are one of the fastest-growing populations in our state and are critical to the future of this workforce. As we strengthen the profession, we must ensure we are not narrowing who has access to it.

4. Build in Equity Review

It's easy for us to sit here today and put all of our intentions on the table. They are good intentions. We all believe in elevating this field. We believe in investing in educators. And we believe Vermont has the opportunity to lead in building a stronger early childhood system.

At the same time, implementation matters deeply. We cannot make the mistake that so often happens in policy, which is good intent and harmful implementation. We cannot risk further reducing a workforce that is struggling as it is. And promises that it won't is not enough. We believe it is critical to build an equity review into the policy. There should be language that requires there to be ongoing evaluation of how the system impacts workforce diversity and access so that we can ensure the intent is actualized in the implementation.

If we are going to take the early childhood field in the opposite direction of most professions today, that are adding flexible pathways and reducing educational barriers for entry into the profession, then we need to take the time to get it right. We should be using CDD to survey every early childhood education program to see first if they even know this bill is being considered and second asking them how it will impact them. We should not be relying on a few voices for what is a serious shift in the field that has implications for how we hire, support, and sustain our workforce.

If we move forward without addressing workforce entry pathways, classroom stability during credential attainment, and equitable access for a diverse workforce we risk creating unintended consequences that could reduce access for children and families.

This bill has a strong vision. One we support. With thoughtful adjustments and investments, it can also be a sustainable one.

Thank you for your time, your leadership, and your commitment to Vermont's children and families. We would be happy to continue this conversation and serve as a resource as you move forward.