

To Whom it may concern,

I am writing today to ask that you not pass bill S.119. I know you have heard from many Family Home Providers, so I am writing from the perspective of an early education center director and the impact that it will have on many centers statewide. While the premise of the bill is to ensure professionalism, education, and high-quality programs, I believe there will be unintended consequences that the field will be unlikely to recover from. I will also point out that ensuring teachers have degrees does not ensure a high-quality program. One of the worst teachers I ever hired had her master's degree in education, but it was quickly apparent that she was not suited to work with children of any age.

My name is Bethany Caruso and I have been in the early childhood education field for over 20 years, and I have been executive director of my program for the last 15 years, all those years at Nadeau's Playschool in Williston. Our program is a four-STAR program, and a Vermont prequalified prekindergarten education program. We are a high-quality program with wonderful child and family relationships, as well as community partnerships and relationships. We have 18 full-time teachers here and one part-time teacher, and of those, 11 have their associates degree or higher and meet the state qualifications for lead teacher, with 8 qualified assistant teachers. We sit in a great position as far as staffing goes and qualified teachers, much better than most centers right now and have a team of very dedicated and hard-working individuals. This bill, as it stands and is introduced now, would requalify my teachers so that only 2 teachers would qualify as ECE II or ECE III and the rest would qualify as ECE I. Most of my teachers who have their degrees, do not have them specifically in early childhood education, they have other degrees with the correct amount of ECE credits to qualify for lead teaching and this bill reads "an approved associate or bachelor's degree program in early childhood education" to be qualified as lead teacher. This bill will supersede state regulations as I understand it and I will go from having all my classrooms compliant with regulations to having 2 of 8 compliant. How is this helping the field?

We have been hearing childcare is in crisis for years now. There aren't enough available spots, it's not affordable, there are no qualified applicants, people aren't moving into the field due to low compensation and lack of pay. Legislation has looked at these issues and taken steps forward to help the field in the last couple of years and we are grateful! This bill is a step back. If programs can't currently find qualified educators with the regulations the way they are, where a lead teacher needs 21 ECE credits and one year field experience, how will this improve when we are going to start requiring an associate's degree or higher for a lead teacher? To clarify, within this bill, a lead teacher would be ECE II or ECE III. I can answer that question, it will not, and it will, in fact, create a further crisis in staffing. I do know there is a plan to allow people to obtain their degrees if they do not meet the qualification within a certain number of years, but asking someone who has already gotten their degree to turn around and take additional classes to obtain another degree is an uphill battle. Most of these teachers are here 9 hours a day and are exhausted at the end of the day, going home to families of their own. You could give them an additional 50 years to get their degree and that won't matter. Most programs do not have the budget, I know we don't, to provide additional compensation when teachers may choose to earn another degree. Free programs for people in the field to earn their ECE degrees and even their ECE teaching licenses have been in place for years now, so cost of education is not the issue. If that was the issue, then every teacher would have just gotten their ECE bachelor's and license. The issue is the time commitment involved as well as the fact that college courses are demanding and tiring on their own. As much as someone is dedicated to this field and improving the lives of children, many would leave the field and find a new profession because they just don't have it in them to take numerous additional college classes.

Take myself for example. I am in school still, at 51 years old, 3 classes away from my Professional Studies degree, with a concentration in early childhood education. I have over 60 ECE credits, but I will not have an ECE degree, that is a different degree. I am passionate and dedicated to this field and the children and families we serve, as well as my teachers, but I would have to turn around and obtain my ECE degree to stay qualified the way this bill is worded and introduced. The wording is very murky in so many places, and I know there has been a good amount of disagreement on phrasing. As dedicated as I am and the vast majority of my teachers are, I would not be willing to backtrack and get an additional degree and neither would most of my teachers.

I am not seeing the benefit of this bill for programs. We have state standards we have maintained. We have additional elevated standards we have maintained for STARS. We have even more standards we have maintained as a prequalified prekindergarten education program. So, who says we aren't professional? I am a professional in my field and my teachers are professionals as well. We do not need people who are not directly in the field, telling us there are new standards that need to be met when we can't hire people to meet the current standards. Centers will close or reduce enrollment at the very least. Family programs will close. Quality of care will suffer. It will become even more difficult for families to find care for their children. Please do not pass this bill as it is written.

Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,

Bethany Caruso

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