

My name is Chris Nelson. I am an Early Childhood Educator and owner of a Family Child Care home in North Troy. When I began my program, I had no idea how to do this correctly.

Imagine for a moment entering this field, like I did almost 30 years ago. This field ---- It was more like a pasture. There was no pathway, and you never knew what you might step into.... I remember my first day - looking at six 2-year-olds and thinking “They don’t fail, if I don’t fail” and “If you know better you do better” And with those two thoughts in mind I set out to be the best I could be – for the children and for myself.

The link between quality early childhood education and positive outcomes for children has been researched for decades and is undisputed. High quality education can provide lasting impacts and may serve as a catalyst for children’s success later in life. Knowing this- I was determined that I would COMMIT myself to this field until I knew no other EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR would ever have to walk this path without the knowledge, skills, support or preparation like I did. The children deserved better, the families deserved better, and I deserved better.

In Fall of 2019, VTAEYC formed a Task Force to collect the voices of the diverse early childhood educators across all of Vermont, to lead the exploration of advancing early childhood education as a profession. I joined that opportunity – with the idea that this would create the long-sought pathway I had envisioned. Everyone who wanted to have a voice has had the opportunity, and those of us who showed up made sure to represent our colleagues. This has been in the works for a long time.

I have both mentored established early educators and trained new early childhood educators. They have high interest, but the field also has high turnover. People want to stay in early childhood education. But just like families need the setting that works best for them, educators also need to work in the setting that fits them best. We retain workers when we have a clear pathway and when people can move along those pathways at a pace, they need for their own lives. A system of individual licensure would allow professionals to move between settings without starting over.

This is not a duplicate licensure – it is an individual license that works alongside the current AOE teacher licensure with early education endorsement that partnering UPK programs already adhere to. It clarifies for families and stakeholders the education and preparation that the early educator has obtained for application in their learning environments.

So, should family childcare educators be viewed differently than those in centers and schools? Absolutely not. Quality is not determined by the door you walk into. All children deserve the same high-quality care, regardless of zip code or what kind of program they attend.

Now is the time. With Act 76, wages are increasing, and we have momentum. When I was mentoring in the Northeast Kingdom, providers always asked, *What do I need to do next?* New qualifications aren’t a concern when we have time and supports to reach them. Family childcare

educators want to be their best – they just need clear pathways that show their efforts will pay off. The better we are at our jobs, the better our kids are. We know it, and research proves it

The benefits of Professionalization extend far beyond the workforce. Better prepared educators lead to better child outcomes. Children who receive high-quality early childhood education are more likely to succeed academically, have better social and emotional development, and are more likely to graduate from high school and are less likely to need special education services, less likely to be involved in the criminal justice system, and more likely to be employed and pay taxes as adults.

This is hard work. These are high stakes.

Establishing an Early Childhood Education Profession will build this critical path to ensure this work can effectively and efficiently create learning environments equipped with staff who adhere to the standards and competencies necessary to ensure success, for educators, for children and for Vermont's future.

That saves our state money. We are breaking cycles of generational stress. Families benefit from stable high-quality care, providers gain recognition and direction in their careers, and children thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I encourage you to support the OPR recommendations for establishing an early Childhood Education Profession within Vermont. I am happy to answer any questions you may have for me.