

## April 2025 Testimony

Hello and thank you Senators. My name is Rachel Hunter. I'm an early childhood educator based in Springfield.

My journey into this field began in 2001, when I opened a Family Child Care Home. Before that, I had degrees in Small Business Management and Marketing and was preparing to buy a business—I never imagined I'd work in education.

That changed when I became concerned about the care my two-year-old daughter was receiving. One day, I found her and four other children sitting unattended in a minivan at a shopping plaza. I removed her immediately and reported the incident. That moment changed everything. I realized I needed to be part of the solution.

I contacted the local Parent-Child Center and completed the paperwork to open my own program. Within three months, I had purchased a home, opened a Family Child Care program, and begun enrolling children. It was exciting and overwhelming. I attended a two-hour orientation and CPR/First Aid training, and was told I needed six hours of annual training to stay registered.

Coming from a business background, I was surprised at how minimal the requirements were—yet I had a certificate saying I was qualified to care for children. The only thing I truly had was a deep desire to keep children safe and prevent the experience my family had.

Over the next several years, I sought out every learning opportunity. I attended workshops and conferences, earned my Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, went back to college for a BA in Early Childhood Education, and received my Vermont AOE teaching license with an early childhood endorsement. I learned that the quality of care I offered—and outcomes for children—were directly tied to my education and training.

In 2018, I got involved with efforts to professionalize early childhood education, first as a facilitator, then as Outreach Coordinator. One of our early goals was to connect with educators across Vermont and ask: Do you support advancing toward a recognized ECE profession? We held 58 in-person conversations with 715 educators and had a 38% survey response rate. Demographics were balanced across roles and settings. The results were clear: 72% wanted to move forward. Another 24% supported partial steps. Only 4% wanted no action.

With that mandate, we moved toward building consensus across the workforce, with workforce leadership. A Task Force of educators reviewed national recommendations and adapted them for Vermont. I led the outreach presenting those recommendations to the workforce and collecting feedback. We made sure our sessions had equitable representation and tracked participation closely. When the pandemic hit, we moved online but remained just as committed to accessibility.

We employed outreach strategies to reach the largest possible audience. We shared sessions and updates through VTAEYC's newsletters and social media, amplified by partners like Let's

Grow Kids and the Vermont Early Childhood Advocacy Alliance. We had paper flyers and social tiles, peer-shared postings to private facebook groups, and peer to peer outreach through networks.

We held daytime and evening sessions, and we offered PD credit to incentivize attendance. We posted videos of our sessions, both full length and summaries, to Youtube and distributed them widely, so educators who could not attend sessions could still stay informed. We offered ongoing “getting up to speed” sessions to folks new to the initiative. If numbers lagged for a sector or region of our audience, we did targeted outreach to make sure we genuinely had all workforce voices represented.

Our sessions followed a consistent format: a presentation, followed by a “Conversation with Intent.” We asked: “What excites you?” and “What concerns you?” We gathered feedback verbally and through surveys, and always validated our summaries with participants to make sure the workforce was driving the work.

Feedback showed strong consensus for our Task Force’s proposals. Educators wanted change: stronger preparation, clearer pathways, better pay, and increased accountability.

Since 2018, we’ve held more than 200 engagement opportunities—virtual and in-person sessions, trainings, webinars, conference keynotes, roundtables, and stakeholder briefings. The sessions that shaped the recommendations submitted to OPR in 2024 happened mostly between 2019 and 2022. Since then, we’ve continued keeping people updated and focused on identifying the support some educators will need during this transition.

Now we have S.119, rooted in national recommendations, the work of OPR, and—most importantly—the voices of Vermont’s educators. Still, some in the field are now raising concerns. I’ve been tracking those concerns, reaching out directly, and monitoring online discussion. I’ve found that most opposition falls into two groups: educators new to the field who missed earlier consensus-building, and those who have been in the field but didn’t engage.

What I see is this: educators who *have* engaged understand the process and recommendations and are supportive. Those who haven’t, are being surprised by false or misleading information and are reacting out of fear. And I get it. This is complex work. It took seven years of intentional engagement to get here. But misinformation spreads fast and does harm. That’s why we continue to offer monthly roundtables—to provide accurate updates and answer questions.

This work has always centered on what’s best for children. The recommendations include phased implementation, earn-while-you-learn options, and flexible, accessible pathways—exactly the kinds of supports I wish I’d had when I started.

I support S.119 because it creates a professional structure that honors the dedication of current educators, and prepares the next generation to do this essential work with the recognition and support they deserve.

Thank you.