

LET'S GROW KIDS

Action Network

Date: Wednesday, January 21, 2026
To: Senate Committee on Health and Welfare
From: Aly Richards, Board Chair, Let's Grow Kids Action Network;
Emilie Tenenbaum, Executive Director, Let's Grow Kids Action Network
Re: Child Care Update, 2026 Priorities and the ECE Profession Bill

Thank you for your continued leadership on behalf of Vermont's children, families, and early childhood educators. Your work has helped achieve measurable results in our child care system. We're two years post Act 76 (Vermont's landmark child care law that passed in 2023) and we're seeing tremendous progress and growth.

Over the past two years:

- More than 100 new child care programs have opened, creating over 1,700 spaces for children and 400 new early childhood educator jobs.
- In every quarter of 2024 and the first three quarters of 2025, more child care programs opened than closed.
- Enrollment in the state's child care tuition assistance program (the Child Care Financial Assistance Program) has grown significantly with over 5,000 additional children and their families getting access and benefitting from reduced child care costs.
- Parents are saving thousands of dollars on child care and we know many child care programs have raised wages and some are offering benefits for the first time.

Here's what we're hearing from Vermonters:

- Teigue Linch, a mother of twins from Chittenden County, shared how her family has been impacted by Act 76: "Before we qualified for tuition assistance, almost my entire income was spent on child care each month. Now that we qualify, we've gone from paying \$3,000/month for child care to just over \$1,000/month. Accessing tuition assistance has given my family the ability to function, to be a two-income family again, and to plan and save for the future."
- This past August, Michelle Bishop was able to open Growing Tree in Addison and access to funds enabled by Act 76 made opening her center possible. She was able to renovate an old building that once housed the town's elementary school. Her program serves 16 toddlers and preschoolers and 80 percent of Bishop's families qualify for full or partial tuition assistance. She's also adding a new classroom that will provide spots for 10 more children.
- In Barre Town, all but one of the families at Alexandria Whitcomb's home-based program qualify for financial assistance. One mom with a child at the program was able to quit a second job that she'd taken solely to pay for child care.

Whitcomb has used the additional funds from Act 76 to purchase higher-quality art supplies and hire teachers to come in for weekly art, yoga and music lessons.

Recent reports from Vermont's leading child care organizations back up these numbers and stories of progress and they also state clearly the gaps that remain and where we need to focus our attention in 2026.

New analysis from First Children's Finance Vermont shows that the state added functional child care capacity between 2024 and 2026. Statewide, access now meets the needs of approximately 40 percent of infants, 70 percent of toddlers, and 69 percent of preschoolers likely to require full-time care, underscoring both meaningful progress and ongoing gaps in access for children and families.

Building Bright Futures also just released their 2025 Act 76 Monitoring Report. The top three takeaways are:

1. Affordability improvements are reaching families. Expanded eligibility and higher CCFAP reimbursement rates are reducing financial strain for families and increasing program participation. Awareness of CCFAP is higher than in prior years, and more families are accessing assistance;
2. ECE Workforce shortages remain the primary constraint on access. Despite increased funding and demand, staffing challenges continue to limit programs' ability to expand capacity, particularly for infants and toddlers.
3. Program stability has improved, but unevenly. Stability varies by program type, geography, and age group served.

It's clear there's more work left. In 2026, we are focused on the following policy priorities: protecting the child care funding driving Vermont's success; strengthening our early childhood educator workforce and passing the Early Childhood Educator Profession Bill; increasing child care access and affordability; and fixing delays in fingerprinting and background checks for ECEs, which are critical for safety and staffing.

We've provided the committee with a full brief on our 2026 Child Care Agenda, which includes more details and our specific legislative recommendations for this session.

Our policy agenda was written and released with our close partners at the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VTAEYC). VTAEYC is the state's largest membership and advocacy organization for early childhood educators. They are the experts who have been leading the ECE workforce over the past 50 years. Before your committee is S.206, *An act relating to licensure of early childhood educators by the Office of Professional Regulation*. The elements in the Early Childhood Educator Profession Bill are based on recommendations made by a task force of Vermont early childhood educators through a multi-year feedback process that engaged over a thousand ECEs. Workforce feedback informed both the recommendations of the Office of Professional Regulation (OPR) and the revisions to the 2025 bill. VTAEYC is the go-to for early childhood educator advocacy and resources and will offer key testimony from leadership and working early childhood educators.

Long-term public investment is helping programs grow and improving the quality of early childhood education. But to meet the needs of families and Vermont businesses, we need thousands more early childhood educators. Our continued progress depends on strengthening our early childhood educator workforce. The best way to do this is to pass the Early Childhood Educator Profession Bill. By recognizing ECEs as the skilled professionals they are and giving them clear career paths, and building in the supports our current workforce say they need, we make it possible to recruit and retain the workforce the system needs. Vermont educators have been calling for this recognition for years, because better qualifications lead to better outcomes for children.

This bill is workforce-informed, workforce-strengthening legislation that has our full support.