

Hello, my name is Jennifer Olson and I'm a Co-Teaching Director at Quarry Hill School in Middlebury. For the last 17 years, essentially my entire professional career, I've held an educator license from the Vermont Agency of Education with an endorsement in Early Childhood Education. During that time I have taught in private, center based programs. I've spent approximately half of those years working with infants and toddlers, and the other half with preschoolers. I've also mentored students in UVM's Early Childhood Education undergraduate program, Vermont's Higher Education Collaborative program and have been actively engaged with the initiative to advance ECE as a profession over the last several years. I have a Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education and a Master's Degree in Educational Leadership. I'm also a parent of a 3 year old and live in Hinesburg.

Thank you for taking the time to hear from me today.

I am here to express my full support for bill S.206 to create a licensed profession of early childhood education in Vermont. As an AOE licensed teacher, I want to be clear that I don't see a conflict with other educators in my field being licensed through a different governing body. To me, professional recognition is critical for standing up an early childhood education system that centers equity for children, families and educators.

As an AOE licensed educator, it's easy to communicate my qualifications to potential employers and prospective families. I demonstrate competency and professional growth through licensure renewal. AOE licensure makes sense for a select group of ECEs working in public schools or UPK partners, and these educators share a common understanding of their qualifications.

But the reality is that the majority of early childhood educators *do not* hold AOE licensure. And for them, there is no shared system or common language to demonstrate qualifications. That makes it difficult to communicate quality to families and difficult for educators to understand and navigate career pathways. When we regulate educators by the same standards regardless of whether they work at home, in a center, or at a school, we shift the focus to *what truly matters*: the competencies educators need to serve young children.

My pathway to licensure was embedded in my undergraduate degree program and I've chosen to maintain it since, whether my role required it of me or not. As I mentioned earlier, I've spent several years teaching infants and toddlers - a critical window of development that holds a dear spot in my heart and one that, I'll note, does not require an AOE-licensed educator. That work led me to serve as a Mentor Teacher at a university lab school where I could both support the growth of very young children and aspiring educators. Later in my career, I chose to work in a forest preschool, seeking an opportunity to participate in a smaller school community and because I love integrating nature into curriculum, and vice versa. In that UPK partner program, my AOE license was essential. For a time, I was the only licensed educator in the program.

I've been fortunate that I've never had to choose my career path based on access to health insurance, and I sincerely wish that were true for more educators. For many, the appeal of public schools lies in compensation, benefits, and time off. Those are important and compelling factors. But for me, it has always been more important to find the right fit.

The philosophy and values of a program—and of the educators within it—matter deeply. When those align, they create the most productive and inspiring environments for learning and working. We need many different

settings and options to meet the diverse needs of children and families. That diversity strengthens the entire early childhood education ecosystem and allows both families and educators to find where they belong.

It *is* possible that increasing qualifications may set up more early childhood educators to complete AOE licensure, giving them the opportunity to choose to work in a public school. But I would ask: *isn't that a good thing*, if licensure increases quality and recruitment across the entire early childhood education system? Especially if that structure supports educators who choose non-public settings, while also creating a stepping stone for those who eventually choose public schools?

What concerns me far more is the number of highly qualified early childhood educators leaving the field altogether—to move into entirely different professions because of higher wages, better benefits, or more sustainable working conditions. Right now, early childhood education lacks the professional structure and clear career pathways needed to retain these educators.

What I want is for the 8,000 early childhood educators in Vermont who currently have no system of individual regulation—and for everyone considering this career in the future—to be supported by clear career pathways, accountability, and transparency through individual licensure under OPR. Our child care system is *vital* to this state, and it deserves a *strong, stable* workforce.

I've never walked into a hospital, doctors office, or other healthcare setting unsure of the qualifications or credentials of the professionals treating my son. I want that same confidence when I walk into an early childhood program—regardless of the setting.

I want to know that the educators are highly qualified, well compensated, and accountable. Professionalizing the early childhood education workforce gives families that assurance, and it gives educators the recognition they deserve for the work they do.

Thank you.