

**OPINION**

# **Heather Duhamel and Kaitlin Northey: Vermont must protect and strengthen the programs that prepare early childhood educators**

Every new classroom that opens needs a qualified early childhood educator to lead it.

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*This commentary is by Heather Duhamel and Kaitlin Northey. Duhamel is assistant professor and program director for early childhood education online at Vermont State University and higher education outreach coordinator for the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children. Northey is associate professor of early childhood education at the University of Vermont.*

Vermont's child care future depends on the strength of its early childhood education workforce. We've made historic gains in expanding access for families, but the system still needs more well-prepared early childhood educators to give our youngest children the best possible start.



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Building a strong child care workforce starts with educating the early childhood educators. Long before caring for your child, your family's trusted early childhood educator was training to teach young children.

Across Vermont, future educators begin their journeys in high schools, career and technical education programs, apprenticeships, community colleges, certificate programs and universities. This variety is a strength, reflecting the many ways people enter higher ed: as students, parents, mid-career changers and lifelong learners.

And these programs are popular — more high school students are taking ECE courses for college credit, and early childhood education courses are among the highest enrolled at Community College of Vermont.

In our work as teacher educators, we see every day how much these programs strengthen our workforce, and why it's important to stabilize them in uncertain times. We also see where students stop their studies, and how we can help them continue.

The Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children recently released the first higher ed landscape study since 2017. The report, **Higher Ed Pathways, Challenges, and Opportunities for Vermont's Early Childhood Education Workforce**, was researched and written by Heather.

Her research finds that students need to see connections between today's coursework, tomorrow's credential, and how continuing their studies impacts their compensation and career.

There are many ways for early childhood educators to enter higher ed, but many stop credit-bearing coursework after two courses, or six credits. This pattern extends beyond early childhood education, yet because our intro classes are so popular, we have specific opportunities to retain students.

And this is important because Vermont needs more well-prepared early childhood educators. As a state, we've invested in helping families afford child care and expanding program access. But every new classroom that opens needs a qualified early childhood educator to lead it.

Institutions are adapting. Flexible scheduling, credit for prior learning and clearer advising tools all help ECEs continue their own education — especially the many who do coursework while working full-time. State investments in scholarships, apprenticeship programs and student loan repayment assistance for early childhood educators are crucial supports.

Yet bachelor's and graduate-level programs remain fragile. Over the past 10 years, Vermont has lost several early childhood preparation programs, and faculty across the state told us that higher ed institutions are now making changes or reductions to programs in an effort to navigate federal funding uncertainties.

Federal policy adds urgency. The 2025 national budget reconciliation bill introduced restrictions on federal student loan access for “low-earning” majors. Without action, many students could lose the very loans that make their education possible, jeopardizing both higher education programs and Vermont’s child care workforce.

This threat compounds the ongoing challenge of compensation: historically, early childhood educators earn low wages, while the cost of care for very young children remains high. Without public investment, families shoulder tuition costs and educators endure low wages. Vermont is leading the nation in changing this, but educator compensation is still catching up.

Vermont doesn’t have to accept this outcome.

Federal law uses state-specific earnings thresholds to define “low-earning,” which means that ensuring early childhood educators are paid according to their qualifications — as in other professions — can protect students’ access to federal loans. This approach strengthens higher ed programs and pathways, attracts new students, and makes early childhood education a viable career choice. Ultimately, it supports stronger child care programs and better outcomes for children and families.

Here’s what we recommend:

- Stabilize early childhood education preparation programs at every level, from high school to graduate school, through consistent funding and policy support.
- Make transfer agreements and pathway maps visible and easy to use for students, advisors and faculty.
- Strengthen coordination between higher ed, workforce and licensing systems so programs and professional standards align.
- Link compensation and advancement to preparation and credentials, so education in this field has tangible value.

These are not abstract policy goals; they're the foundation of the workforce our child care system depends on.

We've seen firsthand that progress happens when Vermont's educators, higher ed partners and policymakers work together. Advocacy and partnership have already reshaped child care in Vermont. Now we must sustain that momentum by protecting the programs that support early childhood education careers.

We've worked hard to build higher ed systems that welcome aspiring and advancing early childhood educators wherever they are in their coursework and career. These systems show real promise. With the right support, they can grow and retain the child care workforce Vermont depends on.

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