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To: Members of the Vermont Senate Committee on Health and Welfare

From: Sharron Harrington, Executive Director, Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VTAEYC)

Susan Titterton, Project Coordinator, Advancing Early Childhood Education as a Profession, Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VTAEYC)

Re: S.206, the "Early Childhood Educator Profession Bill"

Additional Materials:

S.206 VTAEYC Testimony Slides (attached separately)

Memo: S.206: The ECE Profession Bill Strengthens Vermont's Early Childhood Educator Workforce

Good afternoon. **For the record I am Sharron Harrington**, Executive Director of the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VTAEYC).

For the record I am Susan Titterton, the Project Coordinator for the workforce-led initiative to establish an early childhood education profession.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on S.206. VTAEYC fully supports this legislation as the necessary next step to strengthen our early childhood educator workforce, and a strong workforce is what we need to ensure every child and family can access quality child care.

VTAEYC is a non-profit organization that is the largest membership and advocacy organization for early childhood educators in the state, and we are the state affiliate of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), one of the country's leading early childhood education organizations. As a national organization, NAEYC's key role is to promote high-quality early learning for each and every child, birth through age 8, by connecting practice, policy, and research.

In Vermont, VTAEYC works to advance equity and excellence in early childhood education. Our organization's vision is that Vermont's children thrive and realize their true promise in supportive communities. Our workforce requested recognition and clear career pathways; our role has been to support the workforce leadership and engagement that resulted in the workforce-informed recommendations, and request for regulation, that led to this bill. We partner with the Child Development Division to administer a broad range of programs and services for early childhood educators: these resources are foundational to our system's readiness for professional recognition. VTAEYC is laser-focused on recruiting and retaining our workforce that educates our youngest children, and these resources are working: since Act 76, the regulated child care workforce has increased by 8.5%. It's now over 8,000. Since Act 76, the number of people in this workforce with a degree has grown by 22%.

2. Defining Early Childhood Education and Who We Are Regulating

First, a level-set. You may hear both “child care” and “early childhood education.” What are we really talking about? Tammie Hazlett, a family child care program owner in Thetford and a leader in this work, put it best:

“We call some programs child care and we call some programs preschool or pre-k, but **early childhood education is what happens in every quality program, no matter where it is set or what ages are taught.**”

Our goal, and I feel confident this is shared by everyone here, is that Vermont’s youngest children are cared for so they are safe, comfortable, happy, have lots of opportunities to learn and explore and make friends, and are ready when they start kindergarten.

3. Where Young Children Are

Young children participate in early childhood education in a variety of settings. The Child Development Division of the Department for Children and Families (CDD) regulates family child care home programs and center-based programs—both nonprofit and for-profit. This bill only proposes to license educators working in these regulated programs. We now know there are more than 8,000 early childhood educators working in non public school settings.

Most of Vermont’s youngest children are in non-public school programs regulated by CDD. Thousands of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers attend regulated programs in homes and centers 40 or more hours per week. These programs serve babies as young as six weeks old, and for children this young, while their brains are developing so rapidly, education looks like playing, making friends, developing language and motor skills, and learning about their world.

Simplifying Regulation

Early childhood is already a complicated system, involving the Child Development Division, the Agency of Education, and now the Office of Professional Regulation. Some intuitive solutions—like why not have all of education, birth through grade 12, regulated by the same agency?—don’t fit into the system we currently have. We support the regulation proposed by OPR because it fits the system we have now, and our workforce can’t wait any longer for the support, recognition, and accountability that comes with professional regulation.

It may seem odd that adding another regulatory body simplifies things, but it does.

We agree with OPR’s finding that early childhood education should be governed by a board of its own experts, rather than by another such as the Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators, whose expertise is related to the larger public school system and not specifically early childhood education, as delivered across a mixed system.

Currently, CDD has many regulations for child care *programs*. It may well be that Vermont can simplify its child care regulations over time, once we have a regulation system of professional licensure focused on the *people* responsible for caring for young children. A licensed workforce could allow for unwinding some regulations.

4. Why A License to Practice?

OPR has provided testimony about reasons licensing early childhood educators is necessary to protect the public. We will use our time to describe how a system of licensure benefits and strengthens the workforce we aim to recruit and retain.

Clarity and Career Pathways

The current system is complicated. Licensure through OPR offers transparency and consistency across settings. Consider nursing: before nursing became a licensed profession, the field was fragmented. Now, when you walk into any setting where nurses work—hospital, primary care, assisted care facility, summer camp—and you see RN or LPN on a name tag, you immediately understand their qualifications. The nursing profession is stronger as a result, with clearer career pathways and better pay.

Similarly, early childhood educators tell us that a professional licensing system would clarify career pathways, career mobility, help them communicate their skills to the public, and create fairer compensation across different program types. Many describe licensure as a means of securing the professional *respect* they deserve.

Accountability and Public Investment

Licensure is essential for public accountability. Vermont has already made historic investments in child care through Act 76 of 2023. Act 76 does not mandate pay increases, but it creates a mechanism for increasing pay, and because increasing pay or offering benefits stabilizes staffing, [many programs have chosen to do just that](#). With increased investment comes increased accountability, and with public funding comes public accountability. That's supported through a system of individual professional licensure.

5. Increased Qualifications Lead to Improved Child Outcomes

[Research shows](#) that having highly qualified early childhood educators leads to better outcomes for children. This means children are less likely to need special services, are more likely to graduate high school, less likely to be incarcerated, more likely to own a home, have savings, raise their own children, and experience better health.

By ensuring consistent qualifications across all early childhood settings, we ensure that no matter what child care program a child attends, they are supported by an educator who is prepared to help them become a lifelong learner ready for kindergarten. The standards proposed for ECE I, II, and III qualifications align with national standards and Vermont public school standards, complementing—not

competing with—the existing system. This creates a simple, tiered, stackable system of qualifications and accountability, and that does not currently exist.

The bill includes a limited fourth designation, which was included due to family child care home educator advocacy for a legacy option, which we support. This helps retain a section of our workforce we are very mindful of supporting—our rural state relies on family child care homes. Importantly, all of the incentives and supports to increase qualifications are still on offer, and our data already show a rise in family child care home owner interest and enrollment in these resources.

6. National Context

Much of what we've discussed is specific to Vermont, but the framework for the ECE profession and licensure, including the ECE I, II and III designations, is embedded in national recommendations from the [Commission on Professional Excellence in Early Childhood Education](#). The Commission is working toward compensation parity, unified competencies, reciprocity, and practice autonomy for early childhood educators across states, systems, and programs.

Last year, the Senate Government Operations Committee received a [memo from the national Commission on Professional Excellence in Early Childhood Education](#), describing the national process, consensus, designations ECE I, ECE II, ECE III, and a brief of the work other states are doing toward implementation.

Other states have made major strides toward advancing the Commission's recommendations, including transformational investments, similar to our Act 76; improving and stabilizing early childhood educator compensation; increasing access to early childhood educator preparation programs and working to align with professional standards; and working toward professional recognition and governance. Alabama, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Washington, and others are working toward more than one of these components. To date, no state has done more than Vermont to move ahead on compensation, preparation, and recognition, and the [Commission recognizes our state's leadership](#). As our colleagues at NAEYC often remind me, other states are taking notes.

7. Vermont Workforce Engagement

We've talked about how the bill is workforce-informed. We'd like to take a minute to tell you about what that means.

The recommendations VTAEYC submitted to OPR were developed through years of engagement with the early childhood educator workforce across all settings—family child care homes, nonprofit and for-profit centers, public schools, and workforce preparation programs.

The project was originally spurred nearly 10 years ago by workforce feedback that career pathways weren't clear, coursework didn't lead to degrees, and qualification requirements weren't consistent.

Knowing that NAEYC was convening national conversations that would eventually lead to a consensus framework for a national ECE profession, we started with a year-long workforce outreach project to gauge if our workforce wanted to pursue professional recognition. The will was there, so we assembled leadership in the form of a task force of early childhood educators, and launched the formal initiative. Between 2018-2022, over a thousand early childhood educators participated. As we explored each piece of the framework—identity, designations, compensation, licensure—our recommendations were informed by both workforce concerns and enthusiasm. And ultimately each piece was met with between 89-98% approval from participants.

8. Workforce Recommendations and S.206

This strong consensus led VTAEYC to formally request regulation from OPR. OPR's own independent, rigorous review confirmed their recommendations—and added additional transition supports, and the bill before you now adds even more supports than both workforce recommendations and the Sunrise Review. What we have in this bill is alignment with what our workforce has asked for.

9. Honoring Our Workforce

From day one, the number one concern about increasing qualifications has been avoiding unintended consequences, such as driving people out of the field or causing program closures. Our state cannot afford that. The early childhood educators who helped shape the recommendations that led to this bill have been adamant: phase in change; time and supports are critical.

10. Implementation Timeline

The bill thoroughly addresses this concern, including an eight-year, phased-in timeline, providing a renewable transition license for everyone in regulated programs who does not yet meet OPR's recommended qualifications; creating the limited legacy license for family child care home owners, and expanding degree eligibility for ECE II and ECE III licenses. We support this legislation because it is intentionally designed to retain our current workforce, and enables us to recruit the workforce we need.

11. Supports are Already Working

Vermont has built significant resources to help educators increase their qualifications—whether they are high school students exploring a career in early childhood education, longtime educators finishing their degree, and everyone in between, including career changers.

I find we sometimes need to do some myth-busting around how the workforce feels about increasing qualifications. We've found flexible timelines and targeted support makes a critical difference. Chris Nelson, who owns a family child care in North Troy, said, "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."

Scholarships, student loan repayment programs, and apprenticeship programs are already in place and are extremely popular. These resources ensure that early childhood educators are not burdened with the financial cost of meeting new qualifications.

Some recent data. I mentioned at the start, we just learned from CDD and First Children's Finance that we've seen an 8% increase in our workforce and 22% increase in workforce members with degrees since Act 76. VTAEYC administers a number of CDD programs, so we have a view on our own data.

Last year:

- 836 early childhood educators received grants and bonuses for increasing qualifications. That's 30% more than the previous year.
- Of 135 TEACH Early Childhood Vermont scholarship recipients, half were first-generation college students. Scholars represented every child care role and setting, and all 14 Vermont counties.
- We were able to expand our waitlisted Youth Apprenticeship program from 19 to 31 youth apprentices because the legislature approved additional funding — thank you!

We've done, and continue to do, lots of work to clarify education pathways, and meet working educators where they are with flexible and part-time options.

I myself am a career changer, who went through Community College of Vermont's Prior Learning Assessment process, and became a first-generation college graduate. The critical piece is support to overcome obstacles: financial, time, fear of not belonging. That's where Vermont has excelled, investing in resources and building pathways, putting a strong emphasis on mentoring. A 22% increase in individuals with degrees is clear evidence it's working.

Our career advancement team continues to innovate based on what we hear from the field. For example, we're right now launching a cohort-model scholarship program supporting family child care home owners through Prior Learning Assessment, so participants can receive college credit for their years of experience, and continue their learning as a group.

People want to join this workforce, and they want to be well-prepared to do this work. Every early childhood educator who enters or continues in the field thanks to access to these preparation programs means a classroom or program is opening or staying open. And it means richer experiences for the children in their care.

12. VTAEYC Supports S.206

We know how most brain development happens in the first years of human life, and how important quality early experiences are. Quality early childhood education is delivered in family homes and centers as well as public schools. Education is delivered to infants and toddlers as well as preschoolers.

Individual licensure strengthens workforce commitment and stabilizes staffing. That increases capacity and helps programs serve more children and families. And this means all children have access to child care programs that work best for them and their family, and are taught by a stable workforce of qualified early childhood educators. This means families can work, fully trusting the quality of their children's experiences, and children arrive at kindergarten with the skills they need to learn. This is the future we can look forward to when we continue investing in early childhood education, and in early childhood educators. Professional recognition, streamlined career pathways, parity with the public school sector of the early childhood system, accountability with transparency, and most of all, because it creates a system that leads to best outcomes for children.

Thank You

We urge you to support S.206. Thank you for your time and consideration. We welcome your questions.