



Date: Thursday, February 4, 2021
To: Senator Brian Campion, Chair
Senate Committee on Education
From: Aly Richards, CEO, Let's Grow Kids
Re: Child Care Governance and Accountability

Thank you very much for inviting me to join you today. As most of you know, Let's Grow Kids is a nonprofit organization on a mission: we're working to ensure affordable access to high-quality child care for all Vermont families by 2025. Our 25,000 supporters in Vermont include families, early childhood educators, business leaders, health professionals, and other community members who realize the essential role that child care plays in the lives of Vermont's children and their families, for our communities, for our businesses, and for our economy.

Overview

Child care, or what the early childhood field is beginning to refer to as early childhood education, plays an important role in laying the foundation for children's long-term health and learning. When children have access to culturally-, linguistically-, and needs-responsive, high-quality early childhood education, it can close or eliminate achievement gaps caused by generational poverty, structural racism, and social inequity.¹

As background for some of your newer members, Vermont's child care system for young children (ages birth through five) is comprised of two main types of child care: center-based child care and preschool programs and family child care homes. Center-based child care and preschool programs can be for-profit, non-profit, or school-based programs, and many of these programs also provide Act 166 universal pre-K programming to preschool-aged children. Family child care homes, which are especially important for children and families living in more rural parts of our state, are child care programs operated by an early childhood educator out of their own home. Family child care homes often serve between 4 and 10 children of varying ages and may serve more children if the early childhood educator seeks additional licensing and has additional staffing support through an aide or assistant. Some family child care homes are also universal pre-K partners. However, even before the pandemic, Vermont faced a child care crisis. Three out of five of Vermont's youngest children did not have access to the child care they needed, and research estimated that Vermont needed more than 2,000 additional early childhood educators to meet demand.^{2, 3} COVID-19 has only exacerbated these challenges.

In order to address these problems, a very big part of Let's Grow Kids' work is our direct support of child care programs. For many years, our programs team has been mentoring and supporting our state's early childhood educators and child care programs, helping to strengthen and expand existing programs and create new ones. We've been able to dramatically increase that work thanks to the

investments that the Administration and Legislature made over the past two years in expanding child care capacity.

Over the past three years, we've been able to pair state investments with philanthropic dollars to invest almost \$4 million in additional high-quality child care spaces in Vermont. These investments have really helped to counteract the widespread closures that other states have seen because of this pandemic, and we're on track to reach a total of 2,000 additional high-quality child care spaces, located throughout the state, by June of this year—with even more in the pipeline. And the COVID-19 investments of federal funds that the Legislature and Administration prioritized over the past eleven months have helped to preserve these investments and support the resiliency of this sector to weather these many months of increased costs and decreased enrollments.

Another big part of the work of our Programs Team is serving as a resource for child care programs. We have a team of experienced early childhood educators who provide technical assistance to support programs with technology, business solutions, shared services, program practices, and advancing the early childhood education workforce as a profession. Over the past year Let's Grow Kids has provided specific T.A. and resources to help child care programs reopen, stay open and respond to the operational challenges of doing business during a pandemic. Through this work, we've had a firsthand look at the many incredible ways that early childhood education programs have adapted and innovated since the early days of the pandemic. Let's not forget that about 30% of the state's regulated child care programs have stayed open throughout the pandemic, providing care to children of essential workers last spring.

I tell you all of this to highlight the historic fragility of the birth to five system, and the intensive support that has been dedicated to keeping these programs viable in recent years and especially over the past eleven months.

Outcomes

Of course, the most important measure of the child care system is outcomes for children. In spite of the many obstacles facing early childhood education programs and families, data from Building Bright Futures' *How Are Vermont's Young Children and Families* report indicate that, in the 2018-2019 school year, 85% or more of students assessed met or exceeded expectations across literacy, math, and social emotional domains for both 3- and 4-year-olds.⁴

Overall, 84% of Vermont's children were ready for kindergarten in the 2019-2020 school year. However, there are still unacceptable divides in kindergarten readiness among children who are eligible for free and reduced lunch: 76% of children eligible for FRL were ready for kindergarten, compared to 89% of their peers whose families had higher incomes.⁵ There is clearly still much work to be done, especially in creating more equitable outcomes to overcome the many obstacles some children face as a result of historical inequities. Overall, though, these data indicate that our state's early childhood education programs are supporting many children to have high-quality early education experiences that lead to better lifelong outcomes.

Solutions

Building from existing work in Vermont and engaging with a diverse group of stakeholders, national experts, and early childhood education leaders from Vermont and other states, Let's Grow Kids identified promising practices and policies that could address Vermont's early childhood education crisis. To ensure that all Vermont children have access to high-quality early childhood education that meets their needs, our state must commit to enacting the following policies in 2021—and building on them in 2022 and 2023—to support our children, families, early childhood educators, communities, employers, and economy:

1. Make early childhood education more affordable so that no family spends more than 10% of their gross annual income on child care
2. Fairly compensate and advance Vermont's early childhood education workforce
3. Expand access to high-quality early childhood education throughout the state
4. Invest in new IT for Vermont's early childhood education system
5. Strengthen early childhood education system governance and administration, and
6. Identify a long-term funding plan for our state's early childhood education system.

The good news is that leadership in the House and Senate – and many members of this committee – have identified addressing Vermont's child care crisis as a top priority for this legislative session. The House of Representatives this week received a bill, H.171, relating to the governance and financing of Vermont's child care system. The bill has 95 sponsors and will be taken up by relevant House committees starting next week. H.171 proposes many changes in line with the goals above. Together, these priorities will help Vermont build an early childhood education system that is centered on equity and is responsive to the needs and preferences of all children and families, especially those from communities that have been traditionally underserved, disenfranchised, and oppressed by systemic racism, sexism, and other prejudices.

Administration Proposals

As this committee has discussed, the Governor has also proposed a number of initiatives related to child care. The central focus—continued progress on the 5-year redesign of Vermont's Child Care Financial Assistance Program—is a very positive step and signals a continued, shared commitment of the Administration and Legislature to transform the way our state supports families to access high-quality child care. The changes proposed in H.171 align with and build from this redesign that the Legislature and Administration launched in 2019.

The Governor has also proposed providing exemptions from property taxes for private child care programs participating as partners in the state's universal pre-K program. We are eager to hear more details about the specifics of that exemption since we have heard from programs – especially nonprofit programs – that property taxes pose a burden on their very tight budgets.

As the committee heard from Secretary French yesterday, the Administration is also proposing a discussion centered on restructuring the services currently provided by the Child Development Division and transitioning most child care oversight to the Agency of Education, with some responsibilities housed across other departments at the Agency of Human Services. This idea is in keeping with the

Governor's philosophy of taking a "cradle to career" approach to education. We recognize that this restructuring proposal may have merit, especially as the state continues to develop an appreciation for the important role of early childhood educators as part of the continuum of education and setting children up for lifelong success, but we ask that the Administration and Legislature take the time needed to engage in a comprehensive study and planning process, keeping the well-being of children at the center and hearing from those most involved with the work. We do appreciate – and want to stress – the Secretary's acknowledgement to this committee that the current mix of programs serving young children is important to preserve. Young children and their families have diverse needs and it is crucial that we provide a range of options to give each child the strongest possible start.

H. 171 proposes an analysis, led by Building Bright Futures in conjunction with advisors and consultants, to evaluate and make recommendations on existing governance and administrative stakeholders and structures, governance and administrative functions that are currently not staffed or understaffed, emerging system needs, stakeholder engagement in decision making, mechanisms to strengthen oversight, identification of needs and challenges, and ensuring that an antiracist approach is used in modifying or creating policy and procedures. This analysis would provide the ideal venue in which to consider the Governor's proposed restructuring, along with best practices and models from other states, to determine the potential impacts on children, families and early childhood educators. **Ultimately, any decision about governance must be based on creating the desired outcomes for children, their families, and the early childhood educators who form the workforce that upholds all other workforces in our state.**

Conclusion

Vermont's recovery from COVID depends on us getting child care right: that means creating a high-quality system that is accessible to all families, universally affordable, equitable, and that values early childhood educators. We know now, more than ever, that child care is essential to our children, families, economy, and recovery. Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do for our early childhood education system – we look forward to continuing our work together to strengthen Vermont's early childhood education system so that we can all thrive.

-
- ¹ Johnson-Staub, C. (December 2017). *Equity Starts Early: Addressing Racial Inequities in Child Care and Early Education Policy*. CLASP. Retrieved from https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2017/12/2017_EquityStartsEarly_0.pdf.
 - ² Horwitz, J. (January 2020). *Stalled at the Start: Vermont's Child Care Challenge*. Let's Grow Kids. Retrieved from https://www.letsgrowkids.org/client_media/files/pdf/StalledatStart2020.pdf.
 - ³ Horwitz, J. (February 2020). *Access: The Need for More Early Childhood Educators in Vermont*. Let's Grow Kids. Retrieved from https://www.letsgrowkids.org/client_media/files/pdf/2020ECEWorkforceReport.pdf.
 - ⁴ Vermont Agency of Education. *2020 Annual Evaluation of Pre-Kindergarten Education Programs to Promote Optimum Outcomes for Children and to Collect Data that Will Inform Future Decisions*. Awaiting publication. Cited in Crossman, M. (2020). *How Are Vermont's Young Children and Families 2020 Report*. Building Bright Futures. Retrieved from <https://buildingbrightfutures.org/what-we-do/how-are-vermonts-young-children-families-report/>.
 - ⁵ Vermont Agency of Education. (July 2020). *Ready for Kindergarten! Survey (R4K!S) Report 2019-2020*. Retrieved from <https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-early-education-ready-for-kindergarten-report-2019-2020.pdf>.