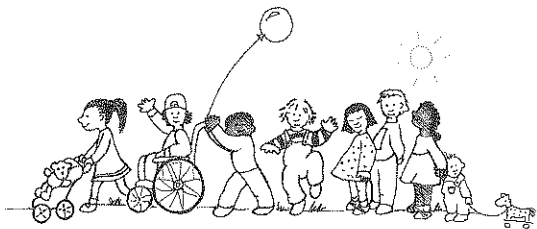


July 25, 2016



Burlington Children's Space

Dear Members of the Blue Ribbon Commission,

Thank you for your time and attention to the question of how Vermont can create a high quality, sustainable, and accessible early childhood system that meets the needs of families and communities. These are questions we have been struggling with for over 30 years and we believe we have some essential data that can help answer these questions.

We have three decades of experience operating a full year, full time early education program for children from six weeks to five years old, with a sliding scale for tuition based on a family's income. About half of our families pay no tuition. Our program has 5 Stars and NAEYC accreditation, an excellent CACFP nutrition program, and multiple community partnerships.

We know that parents, even two working parents, cannot afford the cost of infant and toddler care without assistance. Infant tuition in our program is between \$8,554 and \$12,552 (depending on family income), but the actual cost to the program is \$22,754 per year. If a child receives state subsidy, the average state payment covers \$11,003 and BCS does not ask low income families to make up the difference between subsidy payments and tuition. Many people look at these numbers and ask why we don't raise tuition, why we don't run our center 'more like a business'. We know that unfortunately, raising tuition only puts more pressure on families struggling to pay their bills and increases disparate outcomes related to educational access, which runs counter to our center's mission.

Many people are surprised when they see the disparity between tuition/subsidy and true cost of care, but what is more surprising is that the 'true cost of care' relies on our highly qualified (college educated and licensed) teachers earning between \$11.50 and \$16.00 per hour. In a 2015 study we estimated program costs, based on teachers being paid public school salaries commensurate with education and experience. Most of our salaries would increase by 50% or more. We did not factor in that our teachers work year round, have fewer school breaks and professional development days, receive far less benefits, and cannot receive state-awarded loan forgiveness or continuing education scholarships. In this study, annual costs for an infant increased to \$34,206. Costs for a preschooler were \$21,711.

At times there is the perception that our partnerships with Head Start, the HowardCenter, and local school districts help us make back some of our tuition losses. The reality is that these partnerships are critical to the work we do; without a doubt they add to our success and the level of support we can offer families. However, they also increase pressure on our program to take children in our community who require the most support. Once enrolled, we support these children even if Head Start takes a summer break, HowardCenter's caseload is so high/ funding so low that they cannot quickly replace staff who serve children in crisis. Act 166 partnerships do provide funding for 10 hours per week for 35 weeks a year, yet BCS must hire highly qualified teachers who work 40 hours per week for 50 weeks per year. The supports we put in place (small class size, assistance with subsidy applications, developmental screening for all children, team meetings for any child who requires support, and 36 hours of specific professional development each year) are not covered by any of these partnerships.



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One example of a particularly successful support for children and families is our nutrition program, which is partially supported by CACFP. All families are part of the food program and about 50% qualify for free meals. Over-income families receive free breakfast and snack, and can buy lunch or bring it from home. BCS has a Chef on site who makes the meals, offers monthly taste tests to parents, prepares food for a free bi-monthly family dinner, teaches classes for educators and parents on how to eat healthy on a budget, collects free produce from local farms through a local gleaning program, and puts together free take home meal kits on Fridays for any family who requests one. As you can imagine, to many families on subsidy and those who have recently reached the benefits cliff, these supports are lifesaving. Yet, CACFP covers about \$28,000 of our costs, while meal tickets for over-income families cover about \$9,600. Our costs for food and the chef's salary is over \$53,000, leaving us to raise over \$15,000 a year. Even though staff commit a portion of every day to CACFP paperwork and our Business Manager performs hours of monthly recordkeeping, we do this because we believe nutrition is at the heart of our work with children and families.

So, again, thank you for asking what it takes to sustain quality, access and affordability. Here are our suggestions:

- Cap tuition at or below 10% of a family's income and subsidize the rest for working families.
- Base subsidy rates on the actual costs of high quality care where teachers are paid fairly for their education and experience.
- Compensate programs that are providing services beyond those required for 5 Stars that allow all students, regardless of skill or support needed, to be successful in their earliest school experiences. These services include home visiting, a nutrition program, transportation, specialized care, and therapeutic supports.

In the end, parents and providers often feel they are doing this work alone. We cannot sustain quality education and positive outcomes for all children unless we are willing to increase our public contribution to the early education system; which we see as essential to Vermont's health and success. We don't ask families to personally pay the cost of their children's K-12 education, yet we now live in a state where 70% of children under 6 have all their parents working outside the home. It's time for us to offer high quality, accessible, and sustainable education to all children, from infancy to adulthood.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Staff of the Burlington Children's Space