
H.217 ALIGNMENT WITH VISION FOR VERMONT'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM OUTLINED IN THE VERMONT EARLY CHILDHOOD ACTION PLAN & RECOMMENDATIONS ENDORSED BY THE EARLY CHILDHOOD STATE ADVISORY COUNCIL

While Building Bright Futures and Vermont's Early Childhood State Advisory Council do not specifically endorse or oppose any legislation, it can be noted that there is alignment between the vision outlined in Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP; the state's strategic plan for its early childhood system), the State Advisory Council's recent Policy Recommendations, and the legislative intent and many of the investments and policy changes described in H. 217. The components with apparent alignment include 1) investments and policy changes related to workforce support, 2) quality, access, affordability, and equity in the state's Child Care Financial Assistance Program, 3) pursuing potential expansion of Vermont's Universal Pre-K program, 4) strengthening Vermont's monitoring, accountability, and governance of early childhood programs, and 5) family leadership, engagement, & partnership, and are highlighted below.

Throughout the course of the 2023 legislative session, BBF provided formal testimony 12 times, and advised lawmakers, legislative staff, and the Administration over 75 times. This advisement was based on the alignment (or in some cases, misalignment) with the Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan, available data on the early childhood system (both quantitative, and qualitative feedback collected from key stakeholders), and relevant State Advisory Council-endorsed policy recommendations.

SUPPORT AND COMPENSATION FOR VERMONT'S EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION WORKFORCE

As articulated in the VECAP

As is articulated in the [Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan](#) (VECAP), workforce stability and well-being is paramount to young children and their families having access to the care and services they need.

Currently, workforce shortages, insufficient support, and low wages have resulted in a workforce that is unable to meet the needs of Vermont's early childhood education system. Investments in the workforce and changes to the Child Care Financial Assistance Program that will make the overall sector more stable and sustainable, have been endorsed by the State Advisory Council multiple times in the past several years.

Three key strategies enumerated in Goal 3 of the VECAP are addressed, at least in part by components of the bill:

- Establish an infrastructure that recruits, retains and advances early childhood and afterschool professionals as an essential workforce.
- Promote strategies to increase early childhood workforce compensation and benefits without shifting costs to families.
- Stabilize and sustain the early childhood workforce through policies and structures that promote professional advancement and economic security.

As endorsed by the Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network

Additionally, the early childhood education workforce was a key priority for the State Advisory Council Network this year, resulting in the following series of related [policy recommendations for 2023](#) which were formally endorsed by the SAC in October of 2022.

- Prioritize and invest in the current early childhood education workforce to ensure the field is justly compensated, well-resourced, and valued as leaders and partners in the Early Childhood System by:
 - Making strategic and substantial investments to bolster the compensation of the early childhood workforce
 - Investing in proven professional development programs and ensuring that all early childhood educators have access to resources and supports that make the field a more sustainable and attractive one, such as practice-based coaching, mentorship, Special Accommodations Grants, Early Childhood and Family Mental Health Consultation and treatment, and Early Multi-tiered System of Supports. Ensure these professional development programs and opportunities are comprehensive and coordinate their offerings and activities.

Workforce development and sustainability have been key priorities of childhood stakeholders in Vermont for many years, and previous State Advisory Council Policy Recommendations also prioritized strategies related to shoring up the workforce including:

- Fund education costs, compensation for early childhood education workforce, including scholarships, loan repayment, and wage supplementation ([2020](#))
 - Sufficiently fund and expand scholarship programs for early educators and maintain this revenue annually.
 - Establish a loan repayment program for early educators.
 - Establish a wage supplement program to progress toward adequate compensation for early educators.
 - Prioritize workforce development and hazard pay for this sector

Aligned components of H. 217

- **Sec. 6** - Increases provider reimbursement rates through CCFAP by: moving all child care providers to what was previously the 5-STAR rate and increasing the FY23 5-STAR rate by 35%
- **Sec. 8** - Establishes and funds Readiness Payments to be granted to programs to support the advancement of quality, equity and workforce needs, and to expand program capacity
- **Sec. 8a and Sec. 9** - Establishes CCFAP reimbursement to be based on enrollment, rather than attendance
- **Sec. 9a** - Reduces the gap between reimbursement rates for center-based and family child care home programs by 50%
- **Sec. 10** - Establishes a Child Care Quality and Capacity Incentive Program to recognize and incentivize achievements including things like: increasing access to and provision of culturally competent care, establishing capacity in regions of the state deemed underserved, providing nonstandard hours of child care services, etc.
- **Sec. 23** - Establishes intent to establish a state minimum wage rate for child care providers that is aligned with recommendations from VTAEYC's Advancing ECE as a Profession Task Force Report and that rates by adjusted for inflation
- **Sec. 23a** - Requires the Department of Labor to submit a report on current estimated wage levels for early care and education providers, including other state data

QUALITY, ACCESS, AFFORDABILITY, AND EQUITY IN VERMONT'S EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SYSTEM

As articulated in the VECAP

Similar to priorities related to workforce, ensuring the state's early childhood education system is high-quality, accessible, affordable, and equitable for all families with young children in the state who wish to access it, is a critical part of the vision articulated by the VECAP. Consequently, goals related to ensuring child care and pre-K are accessible, affordable, high quality, and equitably implemented have been foundational goals of Building Bright Futures' work and have been included in a variety of formally endorsed policy recommendations of the State Advisory Council over the years.

Several strategies elevated by Goal 3 of the [Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan](#) are related to ensuring that families with young children are able to equitably access high-quality early childhood education programs:

- Create equitable access to early childhood and elementary education for each and every Vermont child birth through age 8.
- Strengthen and use evidence-based practices to improve developmental and educational outcomes for children 0-8.
- Promote and increase equitable access to high-quality inclusive early care, education and afterschool programs.
- Promote equitable access for each and every child to Vermont's education system to address identified achievement gaps.

As endorsed by the Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network

The State Advisory Council's formally endorsed Policy Recommendations in 2023 included a number of provisions related to equity of access to high-quality early childhood education services, namely ensuring Vermont leads the way on policies related to quality improvement:

- Continue to commit to stakeholder engagement and national best practices within the STARS Revision work and related Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) efforts. The updated Quality Rating Improvement Scale (QRIS) should support efforts to dismantle systemically racist and inequitable tools and structures, and to build a system that supports early childhood education programs in providing the highest quality teacher-child interactions possible through a continuous quality improvement lens.

These same tenants, including a focus on restructuring CCFAP to better support both families and providers, have been priorities in many previous years of State Advisory Council recommendations as well, including:

- Improve equitable access to affordable, high quality early care and afterschool programs by responding to the gaps in current funding. ([2021-2022](#))
 - Respond to the ECE workforce crisis by investing in compensation, recruitment, retention, training, and professional development.
 - Identify state administrative capacity required to serve more families due to the planned expansion of CCFAP and anticipated federal investment
 - Implement and monitor CCFAP eligibility expansion through the development of the CDD Information System.

- Seek resolution around CCFAP payment by enrollment vs attendance policy in CCFAP that will both foster stability of the childcare industry and improve access for children and families

Aligned components of H. 217

- **Sec. 5** - Will allow child care providers to set lower tuition rates than the provider reimbursement rate through CCFAP
- **Sec. 5a** - Provides more families access to CCFAP with no copay (150% FPL to 175% FPL) and increases overall eligibility and access to the program (350% FPL to 400% FPL) in April 2024
- **Sec. 5b** - Ensures more equitable access by: requiring a plain-language format application for CCFAP and by expanding eligibility to Vermont residents whose citizenship status would have previously excluded them from the program, to be paid for by state funds.
- **Sec. 5c** - Increases eligibility for CCFAP further to 575% FPL in October 2024
- **Sec. 6** - Increases provider reimbursement rates through CCFAP by: moving all child care providers to what was previously the 5-STAR rate and increasing the FY23 5-STAR rate by 35%
- **Sec. 7** - Appropriates funding to the Child Development Division to hire new staff required to ensure successful implementation of this legislation
- **Sec. 8** - Establishes and funds Readiness Payments to be granted to programs to support the advancement of quality, equity and workforce needs, and to expand program capacity
- **Sec. 8a and Sec. 9** - Establishes CCFAP reimbursement to be based on enrollment, rather than attendance
- **Sec. 9a** - Reduces the gap between reimbursement rates for center-based and family child care home programs by 50%
- **Sec. 10** - Establishes a Child Care Quality and Capacity Incentive Program to recognize and incentivize achievements including things like: increasing access to and provision of culturally competent care, establishing capacity in regions of the state deemed underserved, providing nonstandard hours of child care services, etc.
- **Sec. 11** - Prohibits child care providers to charge CCFAP eligible families application or waitlist fees
- **Sec. 16** - Requires CDD in consultation with stakeholders to develop a plan to streamline and improve the efficacy of Special Accommodation Grants (SAGs)

EXPANDING AND STRENGTHENING EQUITY OF ACCESS IN VERMONT’S UNIVERSAL PRE-K PROGRAM

As articulated in the VECAP

Building on the strength of Vermont’s early success with Universal Pre-K has long been a goal of early childhood stakeholders in the state. Themes related to both increasing the “dosage” of number of hours offered universally (regardless of income) to families through the program, as well as ensuring equitable access to the program regardless of geographic location, special education needs, or other needs and preferences have been consistently raised as priorities within the Building Bright Futures network and by other partners over the years and are articulated both in documents like Vermont’s Early Childhood Action Plan, as well as in many recent years of Policy Recommendations endorsed by the State Advisory Council.

The above themes are represented in the [Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan](#) through the following strategies in VECAP Goal 3:

- Promote equitable access for each and every child to Vermont’s education system to address identified achievement gaps.
 - Ensure equitable access to high-quality inclusive Universal Prekindergarten Education (UPK) for each and every child.
 - Expand Universal Prekindergarten Education (UPK) beyond 10 hours to address affordability, access, and dosage needs.

As endorsed by the Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network

In recent years, the State Advisory Council has continued to elevate aligned policy recommendations related to these two goals of increasing equity of access within the existing program, and expanding the hours offered universally through UPK.

The [2021-2022 Policy Recommendations](#) included the following related to UPK:

- Seize the day on UPK. Expand access to UPK toward a vision of universal, high-quality, equitable, mixed-delivery, free, and inclusive, education for all three and four-year-olds:
 - Revise the regulatory framework for quality and equity, including agency roles and ability to provide leadership, support and oversight; defining and monitoring quality standards for governance, facilities, licensing, and regulations; and revising the strategic plan with a shared vision toward integration with the larger early childhood system.
 - Seek resolution in the appropriate number of hours and weeks per year for UPK education and appropriate weighting of students
 - Expand Act 35 (An act relating to the Task Force on Equitable and Inclusive School Environments) to cover private UPK programs.

Aligned components of H. 217

While statewide public and private partners have articulated the importance of expanding the current mixed delivery UPK program through statewide information gathering efforts, the VECAP, and recent SAC Policy Recommendations, stakeholders have expressed significant concerns about the final language in H.217, which intends to remove access to UPK for 3-year-olds, and expand only for 4-year-olds.

- **Sec. 2** - Creates a Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee to study and make recommendations about the implementation of pre-K with the goal of expanding the program to provide full-day care and education in public schools and through contracts with private programs to 4-year olds only by July 1, 2026.

DATA INTEGRATION, MONITORING, AND REPORTING IN VERMONT’S EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

As articulated in the VECAP

Goal 4 of the VECAP states that, “the early childhood system will be integrated, well-resourced, and data-informed”. Strategies related to monitoring and accountability, as well as strengthening the state’s data and data governance systems are paramount to the success of this goal. A number of these strategies as outlined in Goal 4 of the [2020 VECAP](#) include:

- Strengthen and align leadership vision at the state level to coordinate agency programs and practices.
- Create a culture of data-driven planning and decision-making
- Establish and advance a data development agenda that guides data collection, analysis and application to inform early childhood policy and practice.
- Equip BBF VECAP committees with high-quality data to conduct their work and empower them to support the State Advisory Council as the accountability infrastructure for the early childhood system.

As endorsed by the Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network

Monitoring progress, ensuring accountability, and supporting a culture of strong data practices and data-informed decision-making have been increasingly identified and prioritized by the State Advisory Council and other early childhood stakeholders in recent years. In 2023, recommendations related to these priorities included:

- As legislation is considered related to Vermont’s early childhood system, the Legislature must prioritize accountability by tasking a specific entity to monitor governance transition, with responsibilities that include:
 - Developing a concrete transition plan with accountability and metrics (process and success) prioritizing cross-sector stakeholder engagement
 - Monitoring any and all transitions over time and reporting annually to the Legislature
 - Defining and measuring success in process and outcomes using a continuous quality improvement framework
 - Ensuring alignment with the vision articulated in the Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan

Previous year’s formally endorsed policy recommendations from the State Advisory Council identified similar priorities:

- Promote Data Literacy And Using Data To Inform Policy Across Sectors By Educating Vermonters About The Importance Of High-Quality Data Collection, Reporting And Integration ([2020](#))
- Commit to early childhood data integration and governance through sustained funding, dedicated staffing, data infrastructure, and data-driven accountability at all levels of the system: executive, legislative, and agency leadership ([2021-2022](#))
- Commit to utilizing data to demonstrate the impact of programs, policies, and resources through routine monitoring and rigorous evaluation ([2021-2022](#))

Aligned components of H. 217

- **Sec. 19** - Charges Building Bright Futures with monitoring accountability, supporting stakeholders with defining and measuring success, maximizing stakeholder engagement, and providing technical assistance to the Child Development Division related to the implementation of the legislation

FAMILY LEADERSHIP, ENGAGEMENT, & PARTNERSHIP

As articulated in the VECAP

A number of other priorities articulated by the VECAP or recent State Advisory Council Policy Recommendations are aligned with or addressed, at least in part, by H. 217. Some of these priorities include working to create a stronger culture of family partnership.

A number of strategies outlined in Goal 2 of the Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan elevate the importance of families as leaders in Vermont's early childhood system:

- Include families as partners in decision-making and provide leadership opportunities at all levels of the early childhood system.
 - Recruit and train parents and caregivers to represent families with children in the prenatal period to age eight for EC systems and community level leadership opportunities.
- Create pathways and ensure open communication channels while connecting families to platforms for parent and caregiver voices in public policy and decision-making arenas.
 - Increase opportunities for parent and caregiver representatives to serve on committees, legislatively mandated study sections, and decision-making bodies to inform local and state policy, practice, and resource allocation.

As endorsed by the Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network

Last year, the State Advisory Council endorsed a recommendation stressing the importance of ensuring that when families are included and welcomed in spaces typically designed for other stakeholders, that logistical and cultural decisions are made that promote their inclusion. The makeup of the Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee, as well as the availability of compensation for participants, is aligned with this recommendation:

- Provide commensurate compensation for families participating in engagement, leadership, or feedback opportunities in order to recognize and honor the time and expertise that parents and caregivers contribute. Make other logistical and cultural decisions that welcome and promote the inclusion of primary caregivers, such as offering alternative or evening meeting opportunities, paying for any associated child care or transportation costs, and providing interpretation services.

Aligned components of H. 217

- **Sec. 2** - Creates a Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee
 - **Sec. 2 b. Membership** - The Implementation Committee includes a diverse group of early childhood education stakeholders and those with expertise related to universal pre-K, including 2 family representatives
 - **Sec. 2 g. Compensation and reimbursement** - States that any member of the committee who is not an employee of the state or not otherwise compensated for their attendance be compensated for their attendance and reimbursed for any expenses incurred.