

Rep. Carolyn Partridge, VT Legislator

3-21-2008 – Notes From Montpelier

Childcare - An Investment in Our Future

When we think about economic development, we tend to think of job creation, transportation infrastructure, broadband, and other telecommunications services, to name a few. One important component in that mix, though it's not, perhaps, the first thing that comes to mind, is childcare. To be a part of a responsible, reliable workforce, parents need to know that their children are being well cared for. When parents are comfortable with their child care arrangements, they are more focused on their work and more productive.

We all want every child to get a good start in life because our future success depends on it. In Vermont, 70% of our children are in out-of-home care situations during the work week. We know that early experiences are critically important to the "hardwiring" of a child's brain so it is crucial that children have nurturing, positive, and stable relationships in their formative years. Child care situations that provide that kind of environment for young children are necessary to guarantee the success of our children's future, as well as that of our communities and state.

Quality care for young children, which includes nurturing experiences with caring adults costs money. In spite of the fact that child care providers often work for low wages and few benefits, the cost of child care is a serious obstacle for most working parents. Parents with two pre-school aged children could have to pay \$13,000 or more per year for childcare while they are at work.

Currently in Vermont, low and middle income families can get help paying for child care through the Child Care Subsidy Program. Eligibility guidelines and subsidy rates determine the amounts of help parents receive. These guidelines and rates have not kept pace with inflation. In fact, eligibility guidelines are still based on 1999 cost of living numbers. Subsidy payments are much less than what they should be to help working families access quality child care. Sometimes, we find that child care providers make up the difference between the subsidy rate and what parents can pay. This puts additional pressure on the providers who already struggle to make their profession profitable and often go without benefits like health care.

In 2006, the Child Care Subsidy Program helped make it possible for over 7,500 Vermont children to access quality, early learning programs. Not only are children benefiting from the kind of experiences that enable positive brain development, but they are also being prepared to be more successful in their later school careers. Additionally, this is bound to identify concerns and problems that can be nipped in the bud, thus saving money and promoting a more successful outcome for children and the state.

In Brattleboro, there has even been a program started to help parents who work other than the nine to five shift.

We should consider the Child Care Subsidy Program an investment in our future. If we could increase eligibility guidelines and subsidy rates over a period of years to better reflect the inflation that has occurred since 1999, it would pay dividends to Vermont's future. With our budget very, very tight for FY 2009, it may be impossible to make that happen, but it is certainly a goal to aim for and is at the top of our priority list.

In Vermont, we should think of child care and early education the same way we think about education, in general - the best investment we can make in our future.