

April 30, 2024
Karen Kuski
Administrator, Education Coordinator
In support of H-7251

Dear House Finance Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to present this written testimony. I am in strong support for **Susan Donovan's bill, H-7251, the Early Educator Compensation Stabilization Act.**

My name is Karen Kuski. I am the administrator, education coordinator at CLE in North Kingstown, I have been employed here since 2005.

I am also the mother of four and the grandmother of seven. I raised ten children before returning back to work in the field in 2005. Four of the children were my own and six were children that I took into my home, cared for them and loved them as if they were my own.. I am also a student at RIC to earn my Masters Degree.

I love my job and working with children. Half of my day is spent in the classroom working directly with the children. I am passionate about giving all the children in my care the best start that I can. I enjoy seeing them grow and develop into unique personalities. Supporting families and celebrating the diversity in each is also a learning experience for me. This is a rewarding and fulfilling job.

I am an older employee, For years I had no health care benefits because my employer could not afford to pay for them and neither could I. That is scary for any person, but especially an older person. Once covid came to be, I did qualify for benefits through HealthSource RI. Before that I was penalized yearly on my taxes because I was not able to pay for health care.

During covid, daycares and early learning centers were deemed essential. Therefore, I worked. I was not able to collect the extra \$600 weekly stipend that others collected in their unemployment checks. Daycare workers were out in the thick of things, taking chances with their own health, and not being able to receive the additional compensation that others were receiving.

Early education supports behavior, positive development and social emotional growth Centers also provide a safe, healthy environment for children while their parents are working. Therefore, we are supporting the families and their jobs. We are helping children and families to grow and reach their potential growth and development.

On the administrator side, I am unable to give my employees a raise, Many of them are deserving of a raise. The money is just not there. We are asking educators to get further training and education, giving them more and more responsibilities, yet we are only offering minimum wage. There is a Burger King two blocks from the center that is paying \$17 an hour. I am unable to compete with that! We have the safety and health of these children in our hands all day and I happen to think that is quite a responsibility!

Because I cannot offer a competitive wage to my employees, I am unable to hire and find myself filling in in the classrooms more often than not. Without the proper number of staff to meet ratios, I am not able to enroll to my capacity. That is another cause for finances to fall short. This has been a huge challenge.

I was very grateful to be eligible for the WAGES compensation. These funds gave me a little bit of wiggle room in my personal day to day life. Prices have gone up on everything, yet we have not received any cost of living raise. I was able to catch up on some bills, stock up on some things for my freezer. I also bought things for the classrooms that the teachers needed. I was not able to buy them with my center's budget.

For the first time in many years, I was able to put some money into my savings account. That gave me some flexibility and helped to ease my mind a bit.

At Christmastime, I was able to give a sizable donation to the little free library in my community so that they could purchase books, school supplies and other items for the area children and those in a nearby shelter. If it had not been for the WAGES compensation, none of this would have been possible.

Providing for early childcare workers is essential. The early childhood workers provide early childhood experiences. These experiences from birth to age 8, affect the development of the brain's architecture, providing the foundation for all future learning, behavior and health. A strong foundation helps children develop the skills they need to become well-functioning adults. The experiences children have early in life play a crucial role in the development of the brain. Exposure to positive factors, stable and responsive relationships with parents and other adults, and safe and supportive environments

promote positive development. The early childhood workers are providing this service to children and their families on a daily basis.

Our child care providers are essential workers. They are being underpaid and undervalued. They deserve our investment, and it cannot wait. Please support the Early Educator Compensation Stabilization Act.

Sincerely,

Karen E. Kuski