

Testimony of Kara Smith in Support of S.B. 912, An Act Concerning Revisions to the Staff Qualifications Requirement for Early Childhood Educators
Wednesday, March 1, 2017

Thank you Chairs and Members of the Education Committee for the opportunity to submit written testimony. My name is Kara Smith and I am the Program Director for Bright and Early Learning Center in Middletown. I am testifying today in support of S.B. 912, An Act Concerning Revisions to the Staff Qualifications Requirement for Early Childhood Educators. As a state licensed, school readiness funded, NAEYC accredited private child care center, we strive to hire the best teachers for the children we care for and educate daily. An early childhood educator is no longer a highly sought out career choice. Teacher's daily requirements increase each year, along with a continued steady increase of behavioral and social/ emotional needs. Our staff work 12 months a year, with limited time off and long hours daily. In addition to all these daily hurdles, we are paying these amazing teachers well below what they deserve.

As requirements for education have increased, we have seen a huge decrease in viable candidates for employment. I believe that the following reasons are the main contributors:

Teachers cannot afford to go to school. While many have been lucky to receive scholarships offered through charts a course, they still have out of pocket costs. And for a teacher who makes \$12 per hour any out of pocket expense for school is a huge financial burden since most are living hand to mouth. And in the end, the pay increase does not really match up to the money spent for an associates or bachelor's degree.

The other major issue is that now ECE has become a stepping stone for teachers to move on to public school jobs. Once a teacher gets their degree, the public school system becomes a much more attractive goal because they get paid more and have their summers off. So that means our turnover is constant.

With constant turnover we lose credibility with our families. In 2016 alone, I lost 4 teachers to the public school after obtaining their degrees.

Education does not always mean "Qualified" teacher. I have turned away many wonderful candidates who do not have the necessary education. Many are people with years of experience, glowing references and ideal personalities, but no education. Then, I am forced to hire people with a degree, who don't have any experience, lack basic knowledge of child care in general and who expect that they are going to make way more than what I can afford to pay because they have an education.

Currently, our most challenging issue is the regionally accredited piece of ECE. I have multiple staff who have degrees, but they are not acknowledged because they are not regionally accredited. So I have one staff member who has been going to school for 6 years now. She already had a bachelor's degree, and had to go back and do it all over again. Not only that, she didn't even have enough transferred credits to even qualify for an associate's degree. 6 years later, this teacher is still going to school, in debt with student loans in order to keep a job she has had for 11 years. She is one of the best teachers, and her qualities were there long before her degree. Another amazing teacher has an associate's degree that does not count and she does not qualify for ECTC, therefore I now have to pull an excellent teacher out of a classroom and replace her with someone else because her degree is not recognized. Her talents are too great to have her covering lunch breaks.

I believe in education. I feel that everyone should have the opportunity to better themselves in their chosen field. With that being said, there has to be a better way to have education requirements and still have a large pool of candidates. It would be helpful for the state to look at regionally accredited criteria first. It would be of great benefit to be able to hire a teacher with a non- regionally accredited degree.

Please support this bill to alleviate this challenging issue we face. Perhaps we could consider, hiring staff without degrees and offering them a way to go to school while working could offer them experience in the field. Therefore, staff can apply their education directly in their work on a daily basis. By offering new hires a time frame in which they can work and go to school we can open up our pool of candidates and give people a hands-on job/study experience.

Thank you for your time and consideration regarding this very important matter.

Sincerely,
Kara Smith, Program Director
Bright and Early Learning Center