

2020 RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE BUILDING BRIGHT FUTURES STATE ADVISORY COUNCIL



The State Advisory Council (SAC) is Vermont's Governor-appointed, primary advisory body on the well-being of children prenatal to age eight and their families. In partnership with Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP) Committees and the Regional Council Network, the SAC sets priorities and the strategic direction for statewide initiatives using the VECAP and up-to-date data. In 2019 and the start of 2020, the SAC worked to drive collective action in Vermont in **2 key areas: (1) Early Childhood and Family Mental Health and (2) Workforce as a critical step to build a high-quality, accessible Early Childhood system.** Given the COVID-19 pandemic's exacerbation of gaps and barriers faced by children and families statewide, as well as Vermont's re-commitment to dispelling systemic racism and social injustice, VECAP Committees and the SAC made 5 areas of policy recommendations.

- 1. RECOGNIZE VERMONT'S EARLY CARE & EDUCATION SYSTEM & WORKFORCE AS ESSENTIAL**
- 2. MITIGATE COVID IMPACTS ON FAMILY ECONOMIC STABILITY & MENTAL HEALTH**
- 3. RECOGNIZE CHRONIC INEQUITIES & RACISM AS A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS**
- 4. EMPOWER FAMILY VOICE TO REBUILD A STRONGER SYSTEM**
- 5. EVOLVE OUR DATA SYSTEM TO ADDRESS GAPS**

Historically, SAC recommendations have only focused on legislative action. The SAC recognized that change must happen at every level to improve outcomes for children and families. Given the update to Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan and in an attempt to draw concrete alignment across all of our work, the **2020 SAC Recommendations** seek to create meaningful change across **four levels of Vermont's Early Childhood system: 1) child outcomes, 2) families and communities, 3) Early Childhood agencies, service providers, etc., and 4) policy makers (e.g. the legislature, Governor, etc.)** (see Figure 1 on page 6). Each recommendation identifies which level of the Early Childhood system is targeted for change within the next year and how it is aligned with Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP). The ultimate goal of all recommendations is to improve outcomes for children.



RECOGNIZE VERMONT'S EARLY CARE & EDUCATION SYSTEM & WORKFORCE AS ESSENTIAL

Why it Matters: A well-prepared, well-compensated ECE workforce is essential to both health and economic prosperity. This was epitomized when the early care and education (ECE) workforce rose to the challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic, stepping in to support children of essential workers and then reopening for all children in June. Teachers, directors, and staff nimbly and safely responded to support wellness for all children and families, demonstrating the critical role they play in a healthy VT infrastructure and economy. Further, families are depending on reliable access to high-quality early childhood education and that is only possible with a well-qualified early education workforce. Scholarships support early childhood educators who need and/or desire to increase their qualifications. For educators who have already accrued related educational expenses, paying back student loans with wages at current levels is a barrier to employment in the field. A wage supplement program will allow those who want to work in early childhood education to do so. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, Vermont faced a severe shortage of early childhood educators and the problem will continue to get worse if Vermont does not invest in this essential workforce. Immediate and sustainable action is needed to ensure an educated and stable early care and education workforce exists to meet the needs of Vermont's children, families and employers.

LEVELS REQUIRING ACTION > FAMILY, COMMUNITY, SYSTEM

RECOMMENDATION 1

Fund Education Costs, Compensation For Early Childhood Education Workforce, Including Scholarships, Loan Repayment, And Wage Supplementation:

- > 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.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Continue Investment In Redesigning The State's Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) By Making Progress In Alignment With Year 3 Of The State's 5-Year Plan, Including:

- > Increase the CCFAP rate paid to early care and education providers so those reimbursement rates closely reflect the true cost of high-quality care thereby reducing the burden on early care and education programs to subsidize the system through low wages and other cost-saving efforts.
- > Fully support needed investments in the technology system(s), staff and resources required to implement the redesigned CCFAP structure and providing an accessible platform for families, educators, and administrators.



MITIGATE COVID-19 IMPACTS ON FAMILY ECONOMIC STABILITY & MENTAL HEALTH



Why it Matters: Early childhood mental health is the foundation of all future child development. Positive environments with stable and responsive relationships build a strong foundation which shapes a child’s ability to make friends, cope with adversity, and achieve success in school, work and community.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created many sources of stress and anxiety for parents of young children across the country and created new barriers for people already suffering from mental illness and substance use disorders. Concerns about health, combined with uncertainty over unemployment and finances, work, and access to food and other resources are all contributing to increasing stress among parents and caregivers. Uncertainties over child care during the pandemic are also contributing to stress for many parents. While there are new opportunities for learning due to both children and parents spending more time together in the home, stress and anxiety may be exacerbated as well.

Decades of neglect and underinvestment in addressing people’s mental health needs have been exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic that must be addressed urgently. The healthier parents and caregivers are, the greater the capacity to stay calm under pressure and support their children’s emotional development. Adults involved in the lives of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers must be provided with the capacity, knowledge, and training to promote optimal social and emotional development by mitigating the pandemic’s impact and strengthening service provision through flexible funding.

LEVEL REQUIRING ACTION > SYSTEM

RECOMMENDATION 1

Mitigate The Health And Economic Effects Of The Pandemic On Families:

- > Extend economic support beyond expiration of CARES Act funds that expire in December.
- > Extend flexibility in eligibility for programs (e.g. Reach Up work requirements) so parents can engage in other activities that help them invest in their future and integral to the health and well-being of their family.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Sustain And Strengthen The Integration Of Mental Health Services For Children And Families Through Flexible Funding For Integrated Mental Health Across Settings:

- > Continue to allow telehealth to be covered by insurance so families can access the care they need.
- > Invest in flexible service delivery and availability.
- > Focus on mental health prevention and staff burnout across many settings.



RECOGNIZE CHRONIC INEQUITIES & RACISM AS A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS



Why it Matters: At the same time that family life has been upended in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Vermonters have mobilized to respond to address systemic racism across the country. In May 2020, George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis by a police officer who knelt on his neck for over eight minutes. For those who live and work with the comfort of racial and systemic privilege, this death brought the experiences of Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) at the hands of the police into renewed focus and pushed countless Vermonters and Vermont institutions to evaluate their role in ending racism. In visioning what an anti-racist approach to social change might look like for the EC system in Vermont, Building Bright Futures released a statement committing to address these issues, which was formally endorsed by Vermont's Early Childhood State Advisory Council on June 22nd, 2020:

"[It is] our responsibility to personally and organizationally explore implicit biases, unconscious racism and actions that contribute to racial inequities. The personal commitment our team has made will better prepare us to be effective stewards to apply a racial equity and economic justice lens to our policies and practices in order to collectively, as an Early Childhood system, make overdue changes for a stronger, more equitable, Vermont. The threats of racism are not new; we recognize many of our existing systems are built on a history of oppression, however we are now stepping up to answer the call to action. Our commitment to positive change will not just be in reaction to current events, but as a part of our ongoing work in the Early Childhood system by integrating and weaving a focus of diversity, equity, social justice and inclusion into our personal lives and all of our work."

It is critical to elevate the focus on equity for Vermont's young children and their families, recognizing that during the early childhood years, the effects of racism and poverty can have profound impacts which shape health throughout life.

LEVELS REQUIRING ACTION > FAMILY, COMMUNITY, SYSTEM

RECOMMENDATION 1

Partner With Vermont's Racial Equity Task Force To Identify And Build Structures Of Support For Racially Diverse Populations And Address Health Disparities And Systemic Impacts Of Racism.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Align And Integrate Equity Initiatives To Leverage Impact And Expertise Across Sectors And Early Childhood Partners To Inform Strategies In The Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan And Early Childhood System.



EMPOWER FAMILY VOICE TO REBUILD A STRONGER SYSTEM



Why it Matters: Family knowledge, values, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds should always be incorporated into the planning and delivery of policies and services. Providing parents and caregivers opportunities to express thoughts and concerns, and partnering in systems conversations and decision-making processes, contributes to an Early Childhood system that mirrors the diverse needs of Vermont families. It also provides children and future generations the opportunity to have a voice and be leaders in the creation of the system instead of solely being consumers of resources, services and supports. Such partnership ensures families become leaders in designing a responsive system that works for them.

LEVELS REQUIRING ACTION > FAMILY, COMMUNITY, SYSTEM

RECOMMENDATION 1

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:

- > Require each legislatively mandated board/committee/study section have at least 1 parent representative with lived experience.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Commit To Ensuring That Children And Families Are In All Policies:

- > Similar to the “health in all policies” initiative, this recommendation is based on incorporating child development and family well-being considerations into all decision-making across sectors and policy areas.
- > At the state-agency and community-based partners level, and at the policy-making level, review programs, policies and legislation to ensure that revisions and requirements consider the impact and consequences to child development and family well-being.



“ This is the one place I feel my voice is heard and it matters.

- Parent Member of the BBF VECAP Families & Communities Committee

EVOLVE OUR DATA SYSTEM TO ADDRESS GAPS



Why it Matters: Vermont has recommitted to using evidence and data to inform service provision and policy. Consequently, Vermont must prioritize and invest in Early Childhood data systems to support optimal outcomes for children and families. Strong cross-sector data linkages will allow decision-makers to understand the long-term impact and return on investment for Early Childhood services and programs. Currently, Vermont's EC databases are inadequate in providing a full picture of child and family outcomes and how the area of services supports better outcomes. Not only is the existing technological infrastructure inadequate, Vermont hasn't prioritized personnel time necessary to support data infrastructure or the partnerships required to execute high quality data systems at all levels (e.g. supporting quality, timely and accurate data collection, data cleaning, and producing reports, summaries and visualizations).

The ultimate goal is for Vermont to invest in high quality data systems which includes financial investment in a single, unified database and resources that work for the Early Childhood system and more broadly, Vermont, ensuring adequate staffing resources (at the state and local level) to support data collection, processing and analysis, and committing to data-informed policy decisions.

LEVELS REQUIRING ACTION > FAMILY, COMMUNITY, SYSTEM

RECOMMENDATION 1

Restart And Support The Early Childhood Data Governance Council And Utilize The BBF Data And Evaluation Committee To Identify And Elevate Data Gaps And Align Priorities Through Cross-Sector Collaboration.

RECOMMENDATION 2

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.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Fully Fund Existing Early Childhood Data Initiatives To Fidelity: Early Childhood Information System (E.g. Bright Futures Information System, Children's Integrated Services) And The State Longitudinal Data System.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Create An Early Childhood Budget That Identifies All Financial Sources Dedicated To Children And Their Families From Prenatal To Age Eight To Monitor, Align And Leverage Financial Resources.

