

Good afternoon Senator's.

My name is Laura Butler. I have operated Imagination Island, a family child care home program in Milton, for 32 years. I also lead a professional network of my peers. I strongly support the OPR's recommendations to license early childhood educators. I believe it's best for children, and I believe it will sustain family child care home programs for the future.

When I started in 1991, family home programs were often seen as babysitting. But I wanted to bring professionalism to my work, so I prioritized my own education, and earned a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. Family child care homes have not always been taken as seriously as centers or public programs, but licensing early childhood educators changes that. And that's important because in our rural state, we desperately need family child care programs. Licensure gives new educators a clear path forward and a reason to stay in the field.

The education that happens in family child care homes is just as important, requires just as much accountability, and demands just as much expertise as education in any other setting. Wherever a child spends their day, they are receiving early childhood education. What determines quality isn't the setting - it's the qualifications of the educator. And without individual licensing, families have no clear way to assess the qualifications of their child's educator.

That's which I fully support the OPR's recommendations as written and why I caution against treating family child care homes differently. I have heard concern from some of my colleagues, who like me are near retirement, and don't want to return to school for more credentials. That's understandable. But the OPR recommends all educators working in registered programs receive a multi-year transitional license, so they can continue working. And for those mid-career educators still building their qualifications, we've been building up the system for years, and there are ample resources and time to get there. The barriers are not there.

Lowering standards for family child care homes would create unnecessary complications and keep our workforce fragmented. Any family child care home educator who switches settings would have to start over. More importantly, it wouldn't be equitable for children. Early childhood education licensure with the same qualifications for all practitioners is the way to go, and that's the recommendations from the OPR, from our own states workforce, and in national recommendations for the early childhood education profession. The goal is simple: children and families should receive quality care and education no matter where they go.

I've dreamed for so long of having a consistent profession that offers the highest quality to children and families. We may work in different settings, but every child deserves the best. And now, we have the opportunity to make that happen.

We have the opportunity to create the most wonderful profession in the world because we get all these babies and little children to show the delights of discovering our world. If you've chosen this as your career, wouldn't you want to be the best at it?

Thank you,
Laura Butler
Milton