

TO: Community Development & Neighborhood Revitalization Committee
FROM: Sarah Adams-Kollitz, Burlington Children's Space
DATE: April 26, 2018

Thank you for seeking community feedback on the Mayor's Early Learning Initiative, I'm sorry I can't be here in person.

For ten years I have been the executive director of the Burlington Children's Space in the Old North End. BCS opened in 1984 with assistance from the City, and moved into its current facility, the McClure Multi Gen Center, in 1998, again with support from the City, in particular CEDO. We take great pride in providing high quality education that encourages children and families to engage with their community in positive ways.

We provide full time, year-round early education programming for 54 children from 6 weeks to 5 years old. We have an outstanding nutrition program that includes meals, nutrition and gardening curriculum, family dinners, and weekly take home food bags for any family in need. In partnership with the Howard Center, we provide therapeutic child care and family support for children who have experienced trauma. Head Start staff provide home visiting, health screening, and parent education to 22 eligible infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Thanks to all of these partnerships, and the dedication of its teaching staff, BCS is able to provide a place of high quality learning and security for children from diverse backgrounds, many of whom have not been successful in other programs. 40% of BCS's children qualify for a state subsidy and another 20-30% qualify for BCS's sliding scale for tuition. BCS has a long history of advocating for the rights of young children and their families.

Beginning with Miro Weinberger's election in 2012, and the inception of the Mayor's Early Learning Initiative in 2015, BCS has engaged in the process out of conviction to the sustainability of the future of early childhood education in Burlington, Vermont. At times, it has felt like our opinions, or those of our colleagues, were heard. Yet, the work group was terminated, the original model discarded, and the funding has not made its way into the community.

We have met with the Mayor, encouraged other knowledgeable early education leaders to participate in the project, and spent countless hours trying to leverage this funding to increase the to benefit the whole community. We have tried to take a big picture view, but the work is particularly urgent for BCS for several reasons:

- BCS serves low income infants, toddlers, and preschoolers who receive a child care subsidy from the State of Vermont. The rates for these subsidies have not been updated since 2008. Because of its quality rating, BCS receives the highest subsidy rate, but still loses over \$15,000 per year per infant and toddler, with few other sources of income to fill the gap. For families on the sliding scale, the losses are even

greater. The cost of providing wrap around services, especially for low income infants and toddlers, is becoming unaffordable to BCS.

- BCS's budget is roughly 1/3 subsidies 1/3 tuition paid by families, and 1/3 grants. In the past BCS has been successful in leveraging over \$340,000 a year in grants to make up the difference between subsidy/tuition and its costs. Private funders have grown tired of propping up an inadequate early childhood system and very few grants are available for operating funds. BCS cannot continue to cover its costs without sustained public investment.
- BCS teachers are highly qualified and trained specifically to work in a therapeutic environment, yet half don't meet livable wage requirements. In the first 4 months of 2018, BCS has lost three dedicated teachers, with very few applicants applying for open positions.
- This year marks BCS's 20th year in the McClure center. Under an agreement with CHT and the City, BCS will have an opportunity to pay off its mortgage and purchase the building. BCS's Board, financial advisors, and long time supporters have been planning for this transition for over 3 years. At one time we had hoped the ELI model would be running by this time, providing subsidies to eligible students to offset some of the shortfall from the State. In 2017 the Board determined that expansion was not feasible and that the open space in the building should be rented or sold to offset the cost of deferred and upcoming maintenance. In 2018 BCS is reconsidering whether it is advisable to take on the responsibility of owning an aging building when revenue is so uncertain.

BCS's story is not unique. In a recent meeting with the Mayor and representatives of VB5, directors from Pine Forest, Trinity, The Family Room, King Street and Sara Holbrook outlined how demands from the State, needs of families and the cost of benefits have all increased while subsidies and tuition have not kept pace. All of these directors urged the Mayor to reconsider his prioritization of expansion over subsidies for low income children in qualified programs.

Over the course of the past 4 years, BCS has tried to work with the Mayor to help him understand the fragility of the existing system as well as the incredible potential for an investment in early education by the City. We have been reluctant to publicly criticize the Mayor's efforts, because the community so desperately needs increased public support for early education. We don't want to jeopardize the funding, we want to see it continue and increase.

It has been very difficult to get him to understand that expansion can't occur on a crumbling foundation or to acknowledge the financial struggles of existing programs doing the work he seeks to expand. The recent VB5 grant guidelines show that expansion has been prioritized over stabilizing existing programs; very few programs, especially those with a history serving the target population, have applied.

Over the course of this project, BCS has gone from optimistic to desperate. BCS has continued to meet the needs of children and families with a dwindling budget, while the ELI funds have gone unused.

In preparation for a recent meeting with the Mayor, I reread his January 2015 press release announcing his commitment to investing in early education. The model he proposed was optimistic, but based in research. The process he outlined was collaborative, but not impossible. Somewhere along the way that original vision was lost. Expansion was prioritized over quality services and sustainability. The needs of children and families were forgotten. The very programs doing the work of the project were ignored in favor of out of state consultants and a revolving set of advisors.

We encourage you to consider the original outline, to help the City reinvest in a collaborative process that considers the perspectives of professionals currently doing the work the City seeks to validate and encourage, and prioritize stability over uncertain growth. Most importantly, we encourage you to move this process along to address the very real struggles of children, families, teachers, and the community.

Thank You,
Sarah Adams-Kollitz

