



UPDATE: Summary of January 21, 2016
Meeting of the Blue Ribbon Commission

The January meeting of the Blue Ribbon Commission focused on the definition and costs of quality child care and on moving forward on a Request for Proposals for consultants to dig into questions facing the commission.

A panel of Vermont child care and financing experts described for the commission some of the issues involved in paying for quality child care.

The cost of quality

Tracy Patnoe, director/owner of Mud City Kids child care in Morrisville shared her experiences trying to balance keeping her center financially sound while offering high-quality care. A couple of numbers tell the story:

- In spite of rising costs, Patnoe has increased rates only three times in 10 years because she knows that families are hard-pressed to pay for child care. “I know families struggle,” Patnoe said.
- In those 10 years, the inability to charge enough to pay her employees good wages has led to so much staff turnover that Mud City has had 70 different employees.

These hard facts have led Patnoe to try to sell her center and ultimately to lease some of her space to an afterschool program.

“Though I love the children and the families, it is draining to deal with the staff turnover and it’s a struggle to maintain a quality program on a very limited budget,” Patnoe told the commission.

Home-based provider Ellen Drolette described the struggle to pay a part-time employee what she believes is appropriate. At the same time, she also worries that the \$225 per week charge for her service is inaccessible to many families.

After Patnoe and Drolette told their stories, Hope Campbell, director of Child Care Programs at the Vermont Community Loan Fund, introduced herself by noting that commissioners may be wondering why anyone would want to give loans to child care providers, given the challenges the commission has heard about.

“I came into this field with tight profit margins,” said Campbell. “And they have gotten tighter.”

While praising the drive to increase and standardize quality in child care, Campbell also pointed to this effort as a cause for the precarious financial situation many providers find themselves in: “We’re improving quality but not paying for it,” Campbell said.

The need, according to Campbell, is to “figure out how we can help families and keep providers in business at the same time.”

Commissioners also heard from early childhood consultant Sherry Carlson and from Marica Mitchell, deputy executive director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. By delving into the connection between cost and quality, Mitchell said that Vermont is “pushing the innovation button.”

Defining the work

Following discussion at the commission’s December meeting, three commissioners have worked as a subcommittee to begin crafting a framework the commission can use to define quality. Commissioners Paul Behrman, Laurel Bongiorno and Reeva Murphy presented their recommendations for creating a definition of high-quality care that will then allow the commission to determine the costs of such care.

As that work moves forward, consultants will be invited to bid on a Request for Proposals (RFP) the commission hopes to have ready in February. Commissioner Colonel Luke Ahmann presented a sub-committee’s recommendations on the RFP, which will focus on three areas that consultants will be expected to explore and report on to help the commission come up with definitions and expectations for their report:

- What is the true cost of high-quality care?
- What is affordable, equitable care?
- How to finance high-quality, affordable, equitable care?

The sub-committee continues to refine the RFP and will be sharing a draft with the full commission in February, with the expectation of getting input from the early childhood community over a brief period early in February and posting the same month. The consultants, who will work with commissioners and others in the early childhood community throughout their contract, will have until August 31 to report to the commission and support development of recommendations due to the governor and legislature in November.

A draft of the RFP will be available for public review by e-mail. To receive this draft and other e-mail updates, contact the Secretary of Administration’s representative to the commission, Jessica Gingras (Jessica.Gingras@vermont.gov).

In addition to reporting on the progress of the BRC through e-mails and web updates at www.letsgrowkids.org, Let’s Grow Kids is live-tweeting BRC meetings from @LetsGrowKids.