

## ***Kids are Priority One***

### **Lawmakers struggle to make young children a priority during tough economic times**

NEWPORT/MONTPELIER — "As we face the budget challenges this year we have to decide the priorities for our future and how critical it is that the next generation of Vermonter's are given the chance to be successful," remarked Governor Douglas as he addressed advocates and legislators during a surprise appearance at the 14th Annual Early Childhood Day at the Legislature luncheon on Friday, March 14, in Montpelier.

"Early education is critical in getting kids off on the right foot so they can get the skills they need to be future taxpayers," Douglas concluded.

Early Childhood Day at the Legislature offers participants an opportunity to speak with lawmakers, talk about policy issues, discuss funding concerns and learn more about public policy solutions to complex challenges facing Vermont young children and their families.

Over 180 early childhood advocates came to the state capitol on Friday to bring home the message to legislators that Vermont's current and future prosperity lies with the healthy development of its youngest citizens.

Speaker of the House Gaye Symington opened the day with remarks to advocates. "Your appearance here matters. To make a difference in this state we need to be individuals talking to individuals." Rep. Symington also noted how access to reliable, affordable childcare is one of the top issues facing Vermonters from a variety of sectors. "When I hear the same issues are facing Vermont business and families I know we need to be listening."

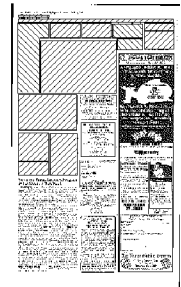
During interactions between participants and legislators, many advocates

stressed that the early years of life matter because early experiences affect a child's brain architecture. As it emerges, the quality of that architecture establishes either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follow. "Certainly, getting that right the first time around is easier and less costly than trying to fix it later," stated Julie Mulroy-Evans, Director of the Building Bright Futures Council in the Newport area.

Special guest Mary Ignatius, from *Parent Voices* in California, shared lessons from her work during her keynote address. *Parent Voices* is a parent-led, parent-run grassroots organization working to make quality child care accessible and affordable to children from all families. "We expanded the message around access to early education; that it is not just a social service but is a necessity - Families cannot go to work if they don't have childcare. No parent should have to struggle with being a good parent and a good worker." Ignatius, comments tied in directly with the message from Symington earlier that morning: Vermont's economy today depends on its workforce having access to quality, affordable childcare.

Vermont's early childhood advocates took this message with them to lunch with their legislators. Many participants spoke with their legislators about finding a way to close the gap in the funding of Vermont's Child Care Subsidy Program. The Child Care Subsidy Program is a crucial piece of Vermont's early childhood system; however, Vermont is not investing adequately enough to ensure children have access to quality early learning experiences when their parents are working. "Reliable, quality childcare not only makes it possible for me to work, it also means I can focus my attention on my job instead of worrying about my childcare arrangements," says Kelly Ault, a parent from Washington County.

Mulroy-Evans chimed in, "We know what works, and we already have the



system in place. Now we have to roll up our sleeves and make Vermont a leader in recognizing early childhood development services are vital to Vermont's prosperity, both present and in the future."

The Building Bright Futures Council of Orleans/Northern Essex seeks to assure that all Vermont children are healthy and successful by improving the

quality, affordability and accessibility of services for families with young children in the areas of health, early care and education.

Kids Are Priority One is Vermont's early childhood coalition working to ensure that every Vermont child gets a good start. **Submitted by Julie Mulroy-Evans-Regional Director-Building Bright Futures-Orleans/Essex**



Local parents and advocates pose with legislators in Montpelier-Front row (left-right) Bobby Starr, Amber Driver, Lisa Daigle-Farney, Theresa Forbes, Diane Essaff, Jody Marquis, Steve Davis, Julie Mulroy-Evans; back row-: Yvette Pulli, Angela Blais, Eric Erwin, Scott Wheeler, Mike Marcotte, Duncan Kilmartin. Missing from photo are Bob Lewis and John Morley



*Bobby Starr talks about early childhood issues from the perspective of the Senate Education committee. Pictured (left-right) Jody Marquis, Steve Davis, Duncan Kilmartin, Mike Marcotte, Bobby Starr.*

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