



Annual Report

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I: Program Summary

The Early Learning Initiative (ELI) continues to adapt to the changing and challenging child care environment through developing new and innovative programs to support the community.

- Enrolled and provided scholarships for 50 children, more than any previous year.
- Launched an early childhood educator training program in partnership with the Workforce Development Manager of the Business and Workforce Development Department.
 - 31 total participants, graduating 29 newly trained educators into the field.
- Funded 2 ELI Capacity Grants supporting existing and new programs.
 - The Wilds Preschool – Seed funding for a new nature based early childhood education and child care program.
 - ONE Arts Community School – Burlington – Funding to support health and safety upgrades at an existing ELI partner program.
- Planning new programs to support the child care community.
 - Substitute Teacher Pool pilot, in partnership with Seed & Sew, to offer the service to a few Burlington programs before launching on a larger scale.
 - Family Child Care Program to support those interested in opening an in-home child care program.
- Following Act 76 rollout and supporting the Burlington child care community through the changes and expansion of state programs

Indicators of Success, 2018-2024

Success Indicator	Outcome Measure
More children in high-quality child care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 256 applicants since 2019 • 230 scholarships offered over 5 years • 197 scholarships accepted for an 86% enrollment rate • 50 scholarships provided in Year 5, most in any one year
Total public funding pulled into the child care community through First Steps Scholarship families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since 2019, almost \$2.4 million in state funding and just over \$972,000 of local dollars paid into the community through the First Steps Scholarship • Year 5, through August 2024: estimated \$168,000 of local dollars spent (reduction due to Act 76) and \$490,000 of state funding
High-quality child care is available for children eligible for scholarship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 90% of applicants were offered a space • Between 2018-2024, ELI Capacity Grants supported the creation of 4 new child care centers and 124 new infant/toddler spots, 38% of existing spots in the City. • 24 First Steps Scholarship partner child care programs throughout 5 towns
Families have better economic well being	<p>For Year 5, 2023-24 Scholarship Year:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 58% of ELI families are single parent households • 83% of families need child care to stay employed or find employment • 40% of applicants have a primary language other than English <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ 10 different languages represented
Young children are more prepared for Pre-K and Kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 85% of scholarship recipients stayed enrolled through four scholarship years • Enrolled children had an attendance rate of 78% of open days, for Year 5

II: Act 76 and State Level Changes and Impacts to ELI

Key Components of Act 76

The passage of Vermont Act 76 marks a significant milestone in the state's efforts to support the child care sector, early childhood education workforce, and families. The bill injects \$125 million annually into the industry and is set to revolutionize the child care landscape by making it more affordable and stable, boosting the state's workforce and economy. Changes beginning in July 2023 are significant wins for Vermont's families, child care providers, and the broader community.

While the legislature supports the child care industry in many ways, changes to the Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) have the largest impact on ELI. Details of those include:

- Increased Income Eligibility for Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP):
 - April 2024: Families earning up to 400% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), approximately \$124,800 annually for a family of four, will be eligible. An increase from the current eligibility of 350% FPL.
 - October 2024: Eligibility expands further to families earning up to 575% of the FPL, or about \$179,400 annually for a family of four.
 - Impact: Upward of 8,000 more children will become eligible for financial assistance, making child care more accessible.
- Enhanced Reimbursement Rates:
 - July 2023: All child care programs began receiving tuition payments at the 5-STAR reimbursement rate, regardless of their STAR rating. Previously, programs with lower STAR ratings received less tuition reimbursement.
 - January 2024: Reimbursement rates increased by 35%, reaching up to \$471 per week.
 - Impact: Higher reimbursement rates will help stabilize child care programs, improve their financial viability, and make tuition more affordable for families.

The Role of ELI in the New State Environment

ELI has been pivotal in supporting families and child care programs through its First Steps Scholarship Program since 2019. This program fills gaps in state tuition assistance and has been a model for other municipalities. With increased state funding, ELI is adapting to continue its support in innovative ways. Ongoing efforts will be crucial in ensuring that

these changes are implemented effectively, and that the community continues to receive support during this transition.

- Continued scholarship support to fill the gaps in Act 76. There are still families that fall through the cracks, and ELI is able to support those who may not otherwise be able to access the system.
- ELI will work closely with partners and families to ensure a smooth transition to the new system.
- Capacity building has been a focus of ELI for many years and the community expects the demand for child care spots to increase significantly. ELI will continue efforts to create more child care spots and train educators who can staff programs.

III: First Steps Scholarship Program, Year 5, 2023-2024

The Fifth Scholarship Year by the Numbers:

The First Steps Scholarship Program continues to see strong numbers in applications, enrollments, and partnering child care providers. This year the scholarship successfully enrolled 50 children as of May 2024. This is the most enrollments to date, speaking to the strong partnerships with providers and their willingness to prioritize First Steps families. ELI continues to support non-scholarship families as they navigate the child care environment. It is a complex system with many different programs, organizations, and requirements.

As of June 2024, First Steps has supported the child care needs for 82 children, including First Steps Scholarship applications and placements; connecting older siblings and/or families not eligible for scholarship funding to preschool and afterschool programs; working with families to enroll in Head Start programs; offering advice and instruction for CCFAP; and linking families to other social services. An additional eight children not eligible for the scholarship program received assistance to find care and navigate the enrollment process.

- 67 total applications - 48 new families and 19 returning from Year 4
- 50 families enrolled in Year 5
 - 75% of all applications have successfully enrolled in child care
 - 89% of all applications have been offered enrollment spaces
- 8 families on the wait list in June 2024

- 24 partner child care programs in 5 towns - children currently enrolled at 17 programs
- 83% of First Steps families need child care to remain employed or find employment
- 40% of applicants' primary language is something other than English, with 10 different languages represented
 - Year 5 has seen the percentage of families speaking other languages double over Year 4.
- 70% of ELI families identify as BIPOC
- 58% of ELI families are single parent households
- 92% of First Steps families qualify at 65% area median income, with 4% of families qualifying between 66% and 80% area median income and another 4% qualifying between 80% and 100% area median income
- 7 families have withdrawn from care throughout the scholarship year, due to moving out of the area, lack of transportation, or changes in family care needs
- Estimated \$186,000 investment for the scholarship year spanning September 1, 2023, to August 31, 2024, with an average annual scholarship of \$3,720
 - Less than previous years because of increased state funding from Act 76

Increased Scholarship Tuition Rates and Added Benefits to Act 76

The First Steps Scholarship layers additional Burlington funds on top of the state-funded Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) to make high-quality care truly affordable for families. Each year the ELI tuition rate increases to keep in line with child care program tuition increases and inflation. Year 5 saw two increases due to the Act 76 rollout and higher CCFAP reimbursement rates from the state.

The maximum scholarship tuition between September and December 2023 was \$437/week, about a 3.5% increase over Scholarship Year 4. The delivery model remained the same as well.

- Families qualifying at or below 65% AMI: Tuition is fully covered to the weekly maximum of \$437 through a combination of scholarship dollars and CCFAP.
- Families qualifying between 66% and 80% AMI: Tuition is covered up to the weekly maximum of \$437 through a combination of scholarship dollars, CCFAP, and a family copayment capped at no more than 5% of the family's weekly income.

- Families who qualified at or below 80% AMI in previous years continue to qualify up to 100% AMI for a flat rate scholarship of \$165/week to be layered with CCFAP.

A major aspect of Act 76 included significantly higher CCFAP reimbursement tuition rates, increasing by 35% for all ages. Distribution of these new rates to programs began at the end of December 2023.

	Infant	Toddler	Preschool
Before Dec 2023 Max CCFAP Rate	\$349	\$328	\$325
After Dec 2023 Max CCFAP rate	\$471	\$443	\$439

ELI rates followed the state changes, causing the delivery model to adjust slightly as well. Previously, ELI always paid more than the state, ensuring true affordability for families and supporting programs contending with state rates that were not meeting tuition needs. With the large increase of the state CCFAP payment, ELI began paying to the maximum state rate, but not over. This means a weekly scholarship is not always paid out for every ELI First Steps family. Some families are already funded to the \$471/week maximum by the state, so ELI does not contribute additional dollars.

- For the remainder of Year 5, between January and August 2024, ELI continues to operate in the three-tier scholarship system with a maximum of \$471/week. Families qualifying at or below 65% AMI: Tuition is fully covered to the weekly maximum of \$471 through a combination of scholarship dollars and CCFAP.
- Families qualifying between 66% and 80% AMI: Tuition is covered up to the weekly maximum of \$471 through a combination of scholarship dollars, CCFAP, and a family copayment capped at no more than 5% of the family's weekly income.
- Families who qualified at or below 80% AMI in previous years continue to qualify up to 100% AMI for a flat rate scholarship of \$180/week to be layered with CCFAP.

The increase in CCFAP rates will greatly benefit our community and provides much needed funding to both families and child care programs. It also impacts the ELI budget, reducing individual scholarships on average by \$80-100 each week. The City is

expecting to pay out an estimated \$80,000 less in scholarship dollars due to the increased state funding.

Although the state CCFAP program is now covering more of the tuition needs for many families, the First Steps Scholarship Program continues to benefit the community in a variety of ways.

- Helping families find available spots and work through the enrollment process
- Facilitating interpretation and translation needs for families who do not speak English
- Supporting child care programs to fill open spots and ensuring full enrollment
- Helping families navigate the CCFAP application process and state system
- Funding families who are approaching a benefits cliff within the City-defined income limits
 - Families who do not qualify for CCFAP
 - Families who only qualify for part-time funding but are enrolled in full-time care and could be responsible for an unaffordable family share of tuition
 - This often occurs with families on shift work, second shift, or who work weekends.
- Families who begin to do better financially but still fall under the 100% area median income and can benefit from another small boost for child care costs.

Increased Annual Income Limits

As expected, the area median income limits increased in 2024. HUD released new income numbers in April 2024, with totals increasing by about \$5,000 to \$6,000 for the Burlington area.

April 2024 Federal Low-Income Limits for Burlington – 80% Area Median Income

Family size	2 people	3 people	4 people	5 people	6 people	7 people
80% area median income	\$76,100	\$85,600	\$95,100	\$102,750	\$110,350	\$117,950

Act 76 State-Wide Changes

Act 76 is increasing income limits for all Vermont residents, allowing many more families to qualify for CCFAP. April 2024 saw the first increase, moving from 350% to 400% of the federal poverty limit:

Family size	3 or fewer people	4 people	5 people	6 or more people
400% of FPL	\$103,284	\$124,800	\$146,316	\$167,844

The final income increase will come in October 2024 including all families up to 575% of the federal poverty limit. First Children's Finance expects up to 80% of Vermont families to qualify.

Family size	3 or fewer people	4 people	5 people	6 or more people
575% of FPL	\$148,464	\$179,400	\$210,336	\$241,272

IV: ELI Capacity Grants

2024 ELI Capacity Grants

ONE Arts Community School – Burlington

ONE Arts Inc. received an \$11,415.15 ELI Capacity Grant to address interior health and safety concerns at the ONE Arts Community School - Burlington, a childcare center located at 294 North Winooski Avenue. The site cares for up to 26 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, with a diverse population and nearly 60% of families receiving tuition support. ELI funded the initial startup of the program with a 2021 Capacity Grant. The 2024 grant was used to improve the physical space of the child care program, including HVAC and airflow needs, space-dividing measures, and a security system for entry points into the program.

The Wilds Preschool

The Wilds Preschool, in connection with Crow's Path, received \$26,275 to support the startup of a new nature-based preschool and child care program located at the North Avenue Alliance Church at 901 North Avenue. The startup costs allowed the program to be furnished with supplies, toys, and educational materials; the space to be organized and operate as a nature-based early learning program; and the outdoor space to be equipped for children to spend the majority of their day outside.

Opening in October 2023, the program began with 12 spots in Year 1, with up to 4 toddlers and 8 preschoolers. They have plans to expand in Year 2 to 20-24 enrollment spots. Backed by the long-established and well-known outdoor education program, Crow's Path, The Wilds is the group's first step into early childhood education. The Wilds Preschool provides outdoor education at an accessible location and is committed to enrolling a diverse population.

Language Access Grants

Language Access Grants continue to support the community. Launched in 2023, details of the program include:

- Grants are available to all Burlington child care programs and First Steps Scholarship partner programs located outside of Burlington
- Individual grant maximum of up to \$800/project
- Programs can apply for up to 3 projects in a 12-month period for an annual maximum of \$2,400
- Costs must have been incurred after January 1, 2022
- Funds administered through a reimbursement model

The Early Learning Center in Colchester received an \$800 grant to support an on-going contract to communicate with enrolled families. Several other programs have reached out for technical support on the application and finding reliable, affordable translation and interpretation services.

V: Workforce Development as a Capacity Building Tool

At the state level, Act 76 has implemented many changes throughout the child care community. The increase in funding is welcomed in an industry that has been woefully underfunded. It has also provided the opportunity for ELI to shift focus and turn toward other needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic focused a light on the understaffed and underfunded child care community. Many programs lost teachers during that time and have yet to rebound to pre-pandemic staffing and enrollment levels. Based on a Spring 2024 survey of ELI parent programs, 11 child care programs currently have 28 open staff positions. ELI has taken the opportunity to build child care capacity through training programs for new and existing educators.

Early Childhood Education Training Pilot Program

ELI partnered with Let's Grow Kids to offer a pilot training program hoping to bring new people into the field. The Early Childhood Education Training Program launched in May 2023 with seven participants.

The program was designed to offer the required trainings with wraparound supports for participants to successfully complete the work. Trainings included a 3-credit Community College of Vermont course – Introduction to Early Childhood Education, 2-sessions of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Early Childhood Education, Introduction to Northern Light Individual Professional Development Plan and Bright Future Information Systems, and pediatric CPR and first aid among other offerings.

The course ran with seven participants, graduating six new educators into the field in August 2023.

- 4 participants completed all trainings
- 2 qualified for an Early Childhood Career Ladder Level 1
- 2 are employed full-time in center-based programs
- 1 is currently a substitute at a center-based program
- 2 are interested in starting family child care programs

This model was considered when the BWD Workforce Development Manager took over management of early childhood education training programs.

First Steps Training Program

The First Steps Training Program launched in the fall of 2023. This program offers Fundamentals for Early Childhood Professionals; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion training; pediatric first aid and CPR; as well as observation placement in area child care centers and advising support from Northern Lights staff. Specifically, the program offers:

- Intro to Child Development
- Early Childhood Environments
- Intro to Licensing
- Observation and Assessment
- Building Meaningful Curriculum
- Social Emotional Development
- Basic Specialized Care
- Advanced Specialized Care
- Language and Creative Expression
- Family-Centered Practice
- Professionalism, Leadership and Ethical Practice
- Pediatric First Aid and CPR
- Diversity training with a focus on culturally responsive care
- Office and advising hours with Northern Lights staff
- Support from the Workforce Development Manager
- Observation positions at local childcare centers

The First Steps Training Program was offered in the fall of 2023 and the spring of 2024.

Overall:

- 31 educators started, 29 educators completed

Data	Fall 2023 + Spring 2024
% Female	71%
% Male	6%
% Non-binary	23%
% BIPOC	35%
% ESL	42%
Employment Rate	77% <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 22 in centers• 2 as substitute teachers

Training for Current Providers

S.E.E.D. Certification

ELI partnered with Seed & Sew to offer social-emotional trainings to child care programs within the City. Schools Excelling in Emotional Development (S.E.E.D.) Certification is an online, asynchronistic training, which allows programs and teachers to learn at their own pace and schedule. Developed by Alyssa Campbell-Black, it is a nationally sought-after program, that Burlington is lucky enough to have as a local resource. The training uses “research-backed practices in the classroom to build emotional intelligence and reduce teacher burnout.”

The initial partnership focused on a cohort of Burlington family child care providers. This program gave five seasoned educators access to both the training and associated platform, and also to each other as they worked through the 8 modules. The monthly meetings offered community, support, and education for at-home providers, who often work alone and feel quite isolated.

The success of the first group led to an expanded partnership with Seed & Sew offering S.E.E.D. Certification to all untrained Burlington programs and supported the financial needs of S.E.E.D. Certified schools' annual membership. To date, ELI has funded:

- S.E.E.D. Certification for 15 child care programs, both centers and family child care providers, at \$22,473
- Recertification for 14 child care programs at \$11,358.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) trainings are being offered throughout the community to many organizations – the City, large companies, the Burlington School District, etc. ELI has established a relationship with Yasamin Gordon, a certified diversity trainer, currently the Director of Inclusion and Belonging for Shelburne Farms. Inclusion of DEI trainings follows the city-wide goals of expanding opportunities for DEI training and education. Child care providers are very interested in participating.

ELI and Workforce Development collaborated to offer available spaces in the First Steps Training Program DEI to partner programs. Many were very interested, and the spots filled within minutes. Several have reached out asking about additional DEI opportunities and resources to fund this important professional development. In the Annual ELI Partner Survey, 11 centers indicated interest and willingness to host or attend DEI trainings.

Substitute Teacher Pool Pilot Project

Continuing our partnership with Seed & Sew, ELI and Workforce Development are supporting work to pilot a substitute teacher pool with a few select Burlington based child care programs.

The City and Seed & Sew have learned from trusted community partners and past attempts at such programs. An already existing database is being implemented to offer administration support for posting and assigning positions. The state Child Development Division has also been helpful explaining licensing requirements and how to operate within the parameters.

Interested educators are signing on to the project, including several First Steps Training participants. The City and Seed & Sew hope to launch in the summer of 2024.

Family Child Care Program Support Project

The City has seen a significant decrease in family child care providers, with over 65% of them closing in the last 10 years. The community now only has 11 home-based providers. ELI sees this an area to increase capacity of available spots and support new entrepreneurs in the City.

ELI, Workforce Development, and Burlington's Small Business Support have collaborated to create a program supporting individuals who are interested in opening child care programs in their homes. This project is working closely with the First Steps Training Program, which equips participants with the training and basic certifications needed to open an in-home program. The efforts were also recognized by the Harvard Graduate School of Education Saul Zaentz Early Education Initiative with the team being accepted into the 1-day conference - *Strengthening State and City Early Education System and Policy for Today and Tomorrow*. The City was 1 of 12 teams selected out of a national pool of 50+ applicants. Rebeca Reese, Alex Bacheller, Will Clavelle, Johanna Schneider, and Kara Alnasrawi attended in early December, learning from experts and advancing the project.

The team plans to launch in the summer, supporting a small group of two to three participants initially. This will allow everyone to learn from each other and ensure the best designed program is being offered to the community. Following the pilot, ideally ELI support will support two to three new family child care providers annually. The training will include:

- First Steps Training Program, if needed

- Fundamentals for Early Childhood Professionals which meet the education requirement
 - Pediatric First Aid and CPR
 - Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion training
- Support with State licensing regulations and background checks
- Registering and insuring a new small business
- Learning about family child care program finances and how to access CCFAP tuition support dollars
- Connecting with state-level organizations that support the child care community

Appendices

Appendix A: Capacity Grant Program Totals, 2017-2024

Center & Grant Award Year	Total Spots	Funding Totals
ONE Arts Community School – Burlington - 2021 (new child care center)	28 spots, 16 infant/toddler and 12 preschool newly created	\$115,091.76 (2 grants)
The Wilds Preschool (new child care program)	12 spots, Up to 4 toddler and 8 preschool newly created	\$26,275
Next Generation – Burlington (new child care center) - 2020	18 infant and toddler newly created	\$19,200
Champlain Valley Head Start (new child care center) - 2019	23 infant/toddler and preschool newly created	\$90,849
Fletcher Free Library - 2019	50 students reached at home-based centers	\$17,300
Pine Forest – 2018 & 2019	69 stabilized and future expansion planning	\$50,000 (2 grants)
Burlington Children's Space - 2018	51 stabilized through building ownership	\$150,000 (2-installments of \$75,000)
YMCA - 2018	38 newly created	\$130,000
Sara Holbrook Community Center - 2018	8 newly created	\$150,000
Full Circle Preschool – 2017 & 2018	4 newly created	\$19,000 (2 grants)
Robin's Nest - 2018	46 improved by teacher/director certification	\$10,275
The Family Room - 2018	Community center stabilized; CCFAP started	\$45,000

Appendix B: ELI Advertisements

First Steps Scholarships



**CHILDCARE IS COMPLICATED.
WE'RE HERE TO HELP.**

Are you a Burlington resident struggling to pay for childcare? Your child may qualify for **Burlington's First Steps Scholarship.**

Scan to learn more, or visit us at earlylearningbtv.org

 **EARLY LEARNING INITIATIVE**
CITY OF BURLINGTON



Feeling stuck in your career? We're here to help.

Apply for our **FREE First Steps Training Program** to gain all the necessary trainings for a career in early childhood education.

This program is available for Burlington residents only.

Learn more at earlylearningbtv.org/for-providers

