

Thank you for allowing me to speak today. My name is Greta Holupchinski. I was born in St. Paul and have lived and worked here throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. I have been an early educator for about fifteen years and spent most of the pandemic working in-person in toddler and preschool classrooms. Just over a month ago, I left the classroom to work with a different organization. My testimony today will reflect my previous position as a classroom teacher with a non-profit organization in St. Paul.

When the Covid-19 pandemic took hold, early educators were proclaimed to be “heroes” along with healthcare professionals and other frontline workers. This was a long overdue recognition of essential professionals in our community, but the “hero” title without action is an empty accolade. Three minutes is not enough to convey the experience of working in person during the height of the pandemic, but I will try my best.

When the pandemic began, we early educators did not have the choice to work remotely as many did. It was scary to be hearing strong messages about social distancing but still going to work with children too young to have an awareness of their own hygiene. I love all my students dearly, but snot and drool are unavoidable parts of the job. The center I had been working at for many years closed right away and I was sent to four other centers throughout the pandemic. I was worried about getting sick at work and bringing the virus back to my family. I am a single parent. I was lucky that my children were old enough to stay home without an adult during the day, but that meant they were on their own with distance learning, and their education suffered because of that. My mom is our support system, and we did not see her in person for a long time because I was working in the classroom and did not want to get her sick. Many of my colleagues were in similar positions. Some made the choice to leave the field in order to be present for their families. Others, like myself, did not have the option financially to leave the workforce. Working in-person during the pandemic affected not only frontline workers, but their families, as well.

In the classroom, a broken system became amplified. With many teachers quitting, things became harder for those that stayed. Teachers were shuffled around to different classrooms every day, trying to cover teacher absences and vacancies. This made it hard to establish a routine for the kids, which is essential for a good learning environment. I have always had to purchase materials for my classroom, but this also became worse during the pandemic. Materials like art supplies could no longer be shared between students, so we needed more of everything. Other items, like Play-Doh, could only be used one time and then be discarded. It became more expensive to provide students with materials they need for proper development. At the same time I was spending more of my own money, I was not making any

more. Because other areas of my company had closed due to the pandemic, there was not even enough money to allow for our yearly cost of living increase.

We did have multiple cases of Covid-19 in the various centers I worked at. Because of HIPAA guidelines, students who tested positive for Covid were not identified. We were informed if we had been exposed to someone who was known to have tested positive, but we did have instances where children tested positive and their parents did not report it. Sometimes, a student would be absent for awhile and come back, and we were not sure why they had been absent. I was lucky not to experience an outbreak in my class until this past summer, when I had already been vaccinated.

Being an early educator during the pandemic was physically, financially, and emotionally taxing, with lots of mixed feelings. Many of my students' parents were healthcare professionals or other essential workers, and I knew how important it was to provide a safe, loving place for their child while they did their important work. At the same time, I could see how working in-person was affecting myself, my family, and my co-workers. Verbal acknowledgement of our field as "the backbone of our community" was an amazing feeling. I humbly submit that words are not enough to compensate early educators for their work, alongside healthcare and other essential professionals, to keep our communities safe and functioning during the pandemic. Please consider allocating funds for early childhood professionals who worked in-person during the pandemic.