

Good morning everyone. It's great to be here.

Before I get into my remarks, I want to thank the many people who've helped put this event together.

First, thanks to Jackie and Beth, their staff and the kids here at Robin's Nest. It's great to see your important work up close.

I also want to thank Let's Grow Kids for helping organize this event and for their leadership in promoting high-quality, early care and learning in Vermont. The candidate forum you hosted in 2016 (before I became governor) highlighted the wide-ranging benefits of investing in child care and it made a real impact on me as I've set my priorities over the last three years.

Additionally, I want to thank Mark Shriver and the Save the Children Action Network for all they do, working in a non-partisan fashion to help states, governors and other elected officials advance initiatives that benefit kids.

In this spirit of collaboration, I also want to thank House Speaker Mitzi Johnson and Senate Pro Tem Tim Ashe for joining us this morning. I want to assure you both: I'll be brief because I know you need to get back to the State House for some important votes.

While we are having this conversation in Burlington, I'd be remiss not to acknowledge Mayor Weinberger who has done some good things locally with his Early Learning Initiative. This program leverages city funds to increase the availability and affordability of quality child care for infants and toddlers in low-income families.

And finally, I want to welcome Jennifer Garner to Vermont. We're pleased to have you and to show you what we think we're doing well when it comes to early care and learning as well as what we're working on to make it even better.

We know from research, and the work of many here today, that the brain develops immensely fast in a child's earliest years. We used to think kids started learning in kindergarten, but we now know the brain is 90% developed by age five, and an infant's brain forms more than one million new connections every single second.

These facts alone provide enough incentive to invest in our kids, because improving their experiences early in life will set them up with the skills they need to withstand adversity as they grow.

But the benefits don't stop there.

Many in this room have heard me talk about Vermont's demographics. We are one of the oldest, fastest-aging states in the country, and the number of people in our workforce has declined by about 15,000 since its peak in 2009. These trends have a ripple effect throughout the state and have significant consequences on our economy, affordability and the fiscal foundation of our budget which is crucial to protecting the most vulnerable.

That's why my top priority is addressing this challenge, and it's my belief it should be a top priority of every elected official, regardless of party.

I also believe our child care system, which I see as part of a cradle-to-career education system, is an essential piece of the solution. As we work to attract working families to Vermont, our commitment to education could be a draw to young families and—quite possibly—the best economic development tool we have in our tool box.

For example, a young couple in Boston thinking about having children might find the cost of care is equal or above their housing costs—and that's if they can even find an opening. In fact, my Assistant Director of Communications (who's here today) has a sibling in this situation at this very moment, and affordability of childcare in places like D.C. and Boston was a factor in bringing another staff member back to Vermont as well.

We still have more work to do to make childcare more affordable, but if we can lead regionally and nationally in affordable and accessible child care that is high-quality, which feeds into our already strong K-12 system, we will be ahead of the curve in attracting families to Vermont.

This approach also lines up with the family dynamics most in Vermont (and nationally) now experience, where both parents are working to advance their careers. We only need to look to our neighbors across the border to the north to see how a robust child care system can support families which, in turn, supports the economy.

Now, while it's not always my first instinct to model policy after Canada, it's useful to look at the common thread of investment in child care and a strong economy. Among Canada's 10 provinces, Quebec has the lowest child care costs as a percentage of income. It also has a long tradition of public support for child care compared to other provinces, going back to the 1970s.

What we've seen is that these initiatives have also helped grow the workforce in Quebec. Between 1998 and 2014, when Quebec overhauled its child care financing system, workforce participation among mothers increased by 13%, compared to just 4% in all other provinces.

So, the data shows positive return on investment in one of our most challenging areas: workforce expansion.

For these reasons, investing in early care and learning is a rare opportunity to achieve all three goals I set on my first day in office: to grow the economy, make Vermont more affordable and protect the most vulnerable.

I'd now like to turn the floor over to Jennifer Garner, and welcome her again to Vermont.