

Collaboration as a Catalyst for Change: The Success of the Early Care & Education Association

A case study in empowering early childhood educators and leaders to transform a regional early care and education system.



“

We are doing this work
because we want all
children to have the
same opportunities
that our grandchildren
are having now.”

– Barbara and Dick Couch,
Couch Family Foundation Founders and Trustees



Executive summary

Despite the potential benefits of early care and education (ECE) for positive child outcomes, supporting parental/caregiver employment, and driving economic growth, the nation's early care and education system is fragile. Its long-standing challenges in terms of access, affordability, and quality are well known.

In 2016, before the COVID-pandemic elevated child care as a critical social and economic infrastructure for our communities and our state, the Couch Family Foundation (Foundation) adopted a new strategic focus on early care and education recognizing both the potential of and challenges the field faced to promote children's development and learning. Its early goals centered around improving access to quality education for young children, supporting initiatives that promoted healthy early childhood development, and advocating for policies that prioritize early education as a crucial foundation for lifelong learning.

This case study highlights the challenge, approach, and initial impact of the Early Care & Education Association (ECEA) which the Foundation seeded and has supported as a thought partner and funder. It showcases how philanthropy grounded in collaboration with grantees can transform and strengthen ECE ecosystems.

By providing technical expertise and financial resources, the Foundation empowered local child care providers to first rebuild, and then transform, an existing director's network, growing it from four active members in 2016 to more than 120 today.

This reimagined network, now commonly referred to as the ECEA, was purposely designed to be provider-led, ensuring that the voices of the ECE professionals working directly in the field are heard, respected, and drive change. While the Foundation provided funding for professional staff support, the network and its strategic plan were designed by providers for providers to meet specific provider needs.

Because the network was provider-led, the Couch Family Foundation's approach was to align expectation of grantee progress to match to the pace of the work providers could envision and accomplish.



Early Care & Education Association staff, left to right: Katie Hopps, Meg O'Leary, Katie Jenks, Amy Brooks, Andrea Dauphinais, Tanika Beauchemin (Photo by Becca Rose Photography)

Today, not only does the ECEA provide mentoring and technical support for center directors, but it also operates a comprehensive suite of child care workforce development programs. These programs are bringing a steady stream of early educators into the field, as well as providing support services to a growing number of director networks, center-based, and family child care providers statewide.

As social policy thought leader Lisbeth Schorr once said, "You can't ever replicate programs. You can only replicate principles."¹ And so, most importantly, this case study illustrates the principles upon which ECEA's success was built—a nurturing philanthropic approach based on trust, collaboration, and patience.

Questions or comments on this work should be directed to Couch Family Foundation Managing Director Brooke Couch Freeland at brooke@couchfoundation.org.

Philanthropic Principles in Action: ECEA

The Couch Family Foundation's method of partnership and collaboration is reflected in five key learnings:



Listen first

Ask stakeholders what they need to drive solutions. Then take relevant action to support them and address those needs.



Build trust and authentic, collaborative relationships

Invest in relationships. Building trust takes time but is crucial for sustainable impact.



Develop a supportive network for all

Effective networks provide collegial and emotional support to both early educators and leaders as well as provide access to meaningful professional development opportunities.



Innovate through provider-led solutions

Support provider-led initiatives as sources of innovative solutions. Empower those on the ground to lead and shape the interventions that can solve their problems. Accept and allow for mistakes to be made to support continued learning and increased effectiveness in program approach.



Be patient and flexible

Allow for adaptive strategies that can respond to emerging needs. Be willing to stick with it for the long term. Resource at a level that meets the need. Deploy resources with an entrepreneurial mindset.

The success of ECEA illustrates the opportunity for our field to learn from the collaborative principles grounded in funder-grantee relationships that enabled early educators and leaders to direct and wield their own spheres of influence. Early care and education, and the ECE professionals themselves, are important and well worth the investment.

Context

The Upper Valley region of New Hampshire and Vermont, which the Early Care & Education Association (ECEA) serves, is a bi-state area encompassing four counties in the Connecticut River Valley, with the river serving as the boundary between the two states.

The region is characterized by its blend of rural and small-town environments, with several key communities acting as hubs for commerce, education, and healthcare.

In terms of its early care and education (ECE) ecosystem, the Upper Valley once reflected the same long-standing problems that characterize the field throughout the nation—a lack of sustainable infrastructure investment, low compensation for early educators, staff turnover and shortages, limited affordability for working families to access care, and lack of continuity in care for young children.² In addition, as is common, the culture of the ecosystem was siloed and providers felt isolated and alone.

In 2016, these long-simmering issues came to a head locally. The region faced a crisis in early childhood education due to the closure of the regional child care resource and referral organization and a wave of local child care center closures.

This disruption significantly affected many working families and attracted the attention of the Couch Family Foundation which had prioritized and supported direct support to providers and early care and education in the region for many years.

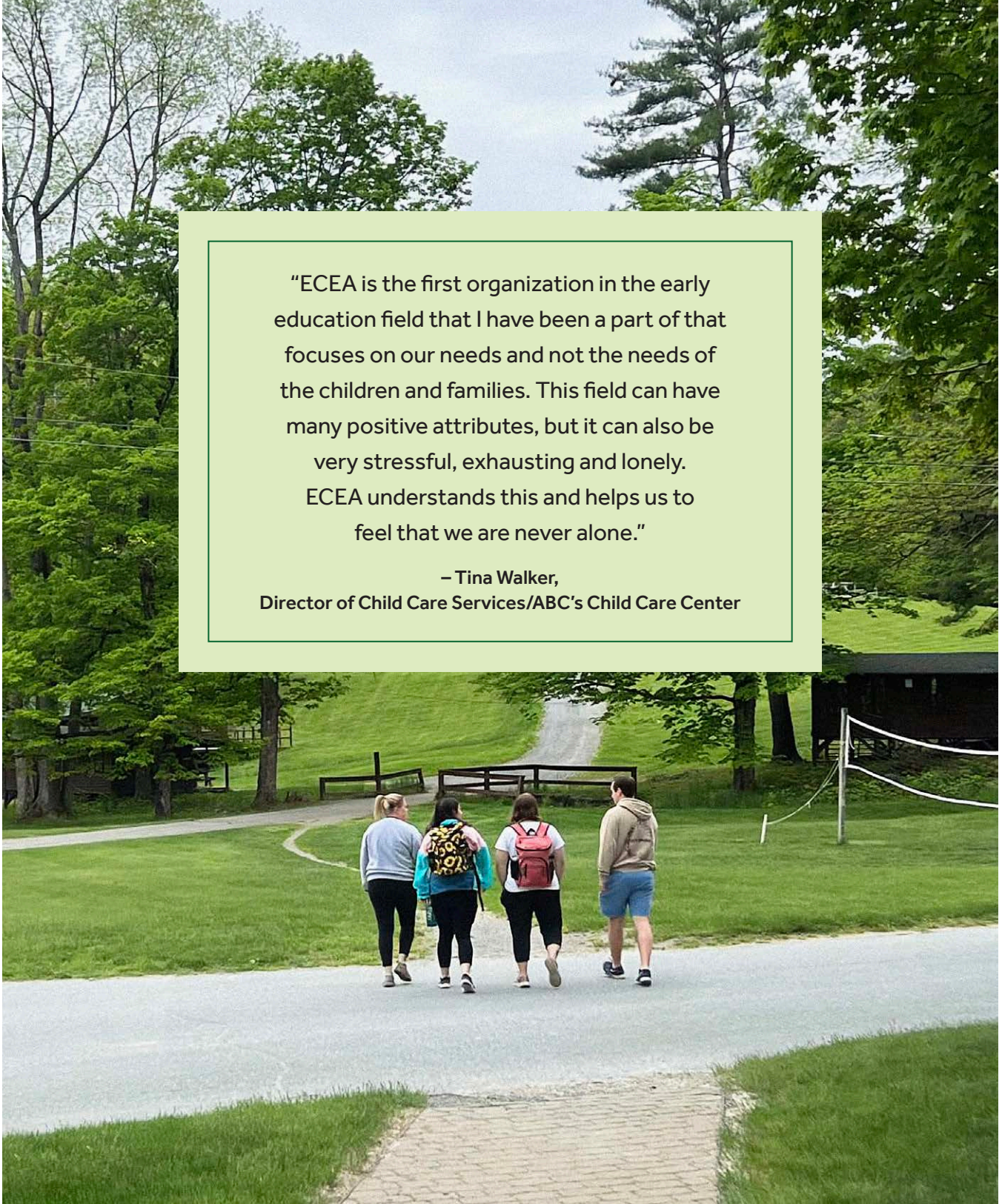
Recognizing the need for a sustainable solution, the Couch Family Foundation embarked on a journey to support and enhance ECE in the Upper Valley through a collaborative, provider-led approach.



Approach

“ECEA is the first organization in the early education field that I have been a part of that focuses on our needs and not the needs of the children and families. This field can have many positive attributes, but it can also be very stressful, exhausting and lonely. ECEA understands this and helps us to feel that we are never alone.”

– Tina Walker,
Director of Child Care Services/ABC’s Child Care Center



ECEA members at the 2024 Camp ECEA retreat in Fairlee, Vermont. (Photo courtesy of ECEA)

Approach

Listen first & seek to understand

Despite the potential benefits of ECE for positive child outcomes,³ supporting parental/caregiver employment, and driving economic growth, the nation's ECE system is fragile. Its long-standing challenges in terms of access, affordability, and quality are well known.⁴

In 2016, the Couch Family Foundation adopted a new strategic focus on early care and education. Its early goals centered around improving access to quality education for young children, supporting initiatives that promoted early childhood development, and advocating for policies that prioritize early education as a crucial foundation for lifelong learning.

As a first step, its Program Partner Michael Bennett began to assess the local environment in the Upper Valley of New Hampshire and Vermont to understand how the Foundation might best support and strengthen the field.

One of the Foundation's guiding principles is to use research and community engagement to inform its work. In conjunction with this assessment, the Foundation also commissioned studies by the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire to document local issues: *Understanding Early Childhood Education Needs and Opportunities in the Upper Valley*⁵ and *Understanding Early Childhood Education Needs and Experiences of Upper Valley Workers*.⁶

The Foundation soon discovered that the regional child care resource and referral organization, funded by both the states of Vermont and New Hampshire, had been closed when each state centralized those operations. That closure left a black hole in the region's child care support infrastructure. As a result, the region's child care programs and family child care providers were even more isolated, and a wave of closures was straining families who needed affordable, quality care for their children.

With no state funding or regional organizational support, the existing informal director's network, the Upper Valley Child Care Association (UVCCA), was now down to four stalwart volunteers with limited capacity to be actively engaged.



The Upper Valley Child Care Association's volunteers, (left to right) Jennifer Parker, Allison Colburn, Vicky Fogg, and Sharon Miller-Dombrowski, who were involved in the formation of the ECEA. (Photo courtesy of ECEA)

With the Foundation's strategic focus and understanding that provider-led child care networks were an intervention that was showing good outcomes in program quality improvement and sustainability,⁷ Bennett met with one of the association's previous volunteer leaders, Jeff Robbins, the former director of the Dartmouth College Child Care Center.



The Couch Family Foundation's next step in supporting the development of the network that evolved into the ECEA began by further meeting with and developing relationships with local child care providers such as Potter's House School and Child Care Center in Hartford, Vermont (above) and stakeholders to understand their needs more deeply. (Photo courtesy of ECEA)

During their initial conversation about the state of the field locally, Bennett told Robbins, "We want to understand the needs of providers. The Foundation is committed to building a stronger ECE field in the Upper Valley."

Then Bennett asked, "What do you need to be more successful?"

According to Bennett, Robbins seemed stunned by the question. "You know, nobody has ever asked us that before," Robbins responded.

That was the starting point that sparked the Couch Family Foundation's collaborative approach to supporting a provider-led ECE network.

"We've just built on that little nugget," Bennett said years later. "That little nugget of us not saying, 'This is what we are going to do for you,' but rather asking, 'What do you need from us to be more successful?'" This approach is a core principle of Couch Family Foundation's engagement with its grant partners.

Therefore, listening has been a key tenant of the success of the collaborative partnership between the Foundation and ECEA.

Sara Kobylenski, an advisor to the Couch Family Foundation who supported the project notes, "The ECEA has been successful because there is a great deal of person-to-person contact. That developed initially from Foundation staff work, then from outreach by Amy Brooks, the consultant who eventually became ECEA's executive director, and then with the additional members of her staff as well."

"That team of people are excellent listeners. They not only listen, but then they respond with action in relation to the needs they hear about from the providers in the sector," Kobylenski adds.

Approach

Build trust and authentic, collaborative relationships

The Couch Family Foundation's next step in supporting the development of the network that evolved into the ECEA began by further meeting with and developing relationships with local child care providers and stakeholders to understand their needs more deeply.

Michael Bennett, Program Partner, met with members of the Upper Valley Child Care Association's executive committee and other local child care center directors to find out what their challenges were and what they were struggling with. His landscape assessment included meeting with other ECE-focused organizations in the state, as well as other private funders.

Using this approach, he was able to provide a feedback loop to the Couch Family Foundation Board so its trustees could understand what he was learning in near-real time.

While assessing the landscape, the Couch Family Foundation quickly learned that the remaining volunteer leadership of the Upper Valley Child Care Association (UVCCA) would need support to begin to rebuild its network because the organization had lost most of its connections to other directors in the region.

"The relationships among area providers had faded," Bennett says. "Being a center director is a tough and often isolated job. It doesn't pay particularly well and there's a lot of turnover. The UVCCA executive committee knew they needed to rebuild their membership but didn't know how to do that. They were all busy and they knew that they needed some additional capacity to help them do it."

In 2017, the Foundation and the UVCCA entered into a partnership via a memorandum of understanding in which the UVCCA hired a consultant, paid for by the Foundation, to rebuild its relationships with regional child care providers, recruit network members, and organize the members toward collective action.

The memorandum established a shared responsibility to strengthen supports for providers, led by the UVCCA (later transitioned to ECEA) and resourced by the Couch Family Foundation.

Funder-grantee collaboration was essential in this effort,

as well as collaboration amongst grantee partners. The Couch Family Foundation not only seeded the project with financial support but also provided staff and trustee expertise that understood the sector, and it served as a thought partner every step of the way.

Over time, this collaborative approach built relationships based on trust. These relationships enabled the regional network to grow from four to more than 120 child care center programs and family child care providers. This evolution did not always progress smoothly or quickly. It took six years and required the Foundation's patience to let the provider-led progress unfold at its own pace.

"We didn't say, 'This is what we are going to do for you.' We asked, 'What do you need from us to be more successful?'"

**– Michael Bennett,
Program Partner**



Approach

Unifying the ECE field: develop a supportive network for all

As noted earlier, professionally staffed networks are one of the few interventions proven effective in reducing isolation and promoting sustainability among child care programs and providers.⁸

Knowing this, the Couch Family Foundation studied the work of the Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund which was supporting a director’s network in an even more rural part of northern New Hampshire and thought that a similar approach would show promise for the Upper Valley.

Effective networks provide collegial and emotional support to both early educators and leaders as well as provide access to meaningful professional development opportunities.

However, it’s common for child care center directors and family child care providers to initially view one another

as competitors and to be guarded in their network participation by confidentiality concerns.

The Foundation provided a grant to support a professionally facilitated ECEA core values retreat in 2019 with the objective of developing rapport among providers. The relationships and trust that started during the retreat led to what is now close collaboration among the more than 120 area child care programs and family providers in the network. “Directors learned to work collectively toward a shared vision,” commented Michael Bennett. “It built on the trust and then moved to action.”



The 2019 ECEA core values retreat that helped develop rapport among providers. The retreat fostered relationships and trust that led to what is now close collaboration among the more than 120 area family and center-based programs in the network. (Photo courtesy of ECEA)

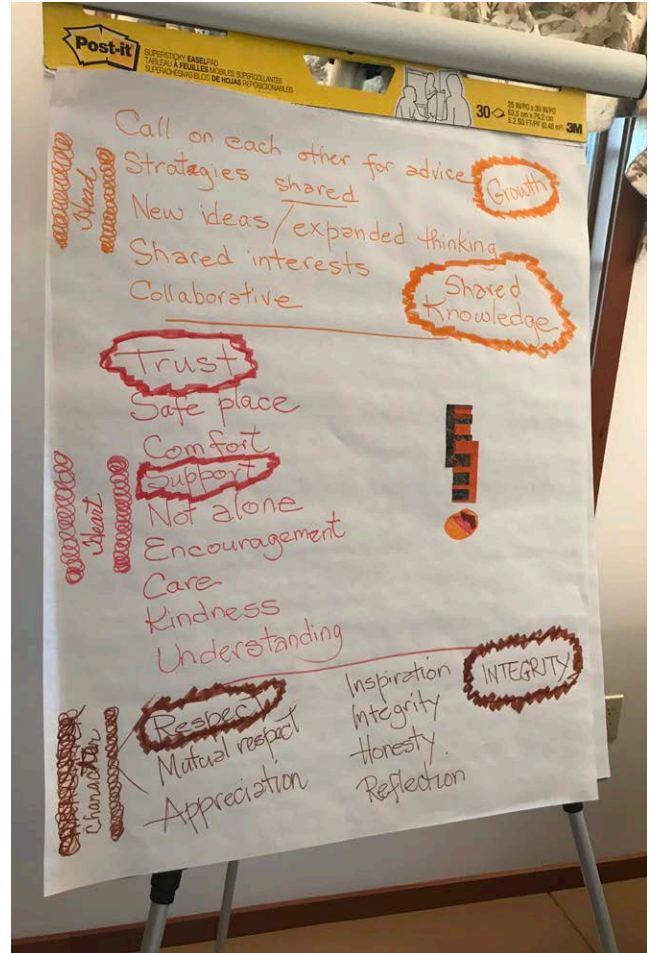
Approach

“Our individual projects are successful, but I think why they’re successful is because of the grounding of our people as a network—as a group that no longer sees themselves as competitors, but as part of a greater effort to solve a problem,” explained Amy Brooks, ECEA Executive Director.

Building relationships among previously isolated providers meant they are identifying and solving problems to enhance their work supporting young children and their families. Unifying the field even further, both providers working in center-based and in family child care settings embraced the values and approach that the ECEA developed:

- Tapping into the power of shared knowledge and collective experience.
- Forging collaboration that is inclusive, focused, safe, non-competitive, and diverse in thought and experience.
- Collectively acting with reachable goals that affect positive outcomes.
- Forming supportive relationships that empower, validate, and provide options for finding solutions.

These values also reflected the Foundation’s own operating principles, so there was deep funder/grantee alignment in both philosophy and in how to get things done.



A worksheet from the 2019 ECEA core values retreat. (Photo courtesy of ECEA)

(Photo by Becca Rose Photography)



“ECEA became an organization that met the needs of the all. It’s more of a we than a me.”

– Amy Brooks, ECEA Executive Director

Approach

Innovate through provider-led solutions

The ECEA network was purposely designed to be provider-led, ensuring that the voices of those working directly in the field were heard and respected. This bottom-up, field-led approach has proven highly effective in meeting the real needs of providers.

“It was an intentional partnership,” says Michael Bennett, Foundation Program Partner. “Our initial memorandum of understanding was structured so that we committed to do the work *together*. The Foundation would provide the financial support, but it would be led by the executive committee of the UVCCA.”

“Ensuring that providers had the final say in key decisions was critical to the early development of the group,” he notes.

As an example, the Couch Family Foundation intentionally gave the executive committee the final word in selecting the consultant who would work to rebuild its network. Staff members and trustees participated in the interview process, but members of the UVCCA executive committee had final say.

“The Foundation trustees were part of the consultant interview process and met regularly with the executive committee,” Bennett says. “That personal touch set the tone for the relationship.”

It is important to note that since the UVCCA did not have official nonprofit status and did not at that time have a fiscal sponsor, the Foundation hired the consultant directly.

“The trustees also leaned in to help solve other problems, such as identifying a potential fiscal sponsor, and we discussed with the board the pros and cons with different fiscal sponsor relationships,” noted Bennett.

“The decision to hire the consultant directly forced us to think through the power dynamics of overseeing that consultant’s work while ensuring they were ultimately responsive to the needs of providers,” he added.

The Foundation was also patient in allowing the leadership of ECEA to make mistakes, and to learn from them as its work evolved. Its philosophy is that course correction is a necessary part of the growth process; that mistakes are learning opportunities; and that persistence pays off.

“From the beginning the Couch trustees valued risk taking,” said Bennett. “The mantra of their manufacturing



“I call the ECEA a shared service model. It invests in child care through public-private partnerships and has evolved organically from the ground up. And so, it’s continuing to understand the needs of providers and be responsive to those needs.”

– Brooke Couch Freeland, Managing Director

“Before participating in ECEA events and meetings, I only knew a few other directors in the Upper Valley. I now have connections all over the Upper Valley and have grown friendships out of these experiences. The ECEA has helped guide me and provide me with resources when I have needed them the most. I always feel welcome and like I matter.”

– ECEA member



22 Upper Valley child care directors, assistant directors, and family child care providers heading to the Association for Early Learning Leaders Annual Conference in April 2024. Opportunities like this are made possible by the collaboration with the Couch Family Foundation. (Photo courtesy of ECEA)

company, Hypertherm,^{*} was ‘shaping possibility’ through innovation. That mindset helped us advocate for taking a risk on this fledgling group.”

It is also important to note that Amy Brooks, the consultant who was first hired to help the UVCCA rebuild its network and who eventually became the ECEA’s first executive director, had formerly owned and operated her own child care center. She knew first-hand the challenges center directors face and related with them from a respectful, practical perspective, earning their trust along the way.

Today, the ECEA is an established nonprofit with 501(c)(3) status with a professional staff of seven. From the beginning, center directors formed the ECEA board, shaped the organization’s strategic plan (with guidance from a professional consultant), created its core values and its workplan and envisioned its provider support initiatives like the Career Cultivator workforce building strategy.

^{*}Richard Couch founded Hypertherm in 1968 after graduating from Dartmouth College, and led the company for 51 years as CEO and Chairman. Hypertherm is a U.S.-based leading manufacturer of industrial cutting systems and software. Barbara Couch worked alongside Richard in Human Resources and as Vice President of Corporate Social Responsibility, later founding the Hypertherm HOPE Foundation. When planning succession, the Couches chose an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) model, placing ownership in the hands of the employees—the people who helped build the company and its success. For the Couches this was the right and best option aligning with their belief of sharing rewards. Through the ESOP transaction, the Couches were able to create the Couch Family Foundation.

Approach

Provide sustained, flexible, strategic support matching the pace of responsive organizational growth

The Couch Family Foundation provided sustained, flexible, patient funding and operational support, allowing the ECEA to develop organically and to be responsive to emerging needs in the ECE field. While Foundation grants were generally project specific for staff or capacity support, they functioned more like unrestricted funding.

Beginning in 2016, Foundation staff spent a year meeting with stakeholders, listening and laying the groundwork for the initiative, before even entering into its memorandum of understanding with the UVCCA and supporting the rebuilding of its network.

“One of our key values has been an openness to not know exactly where the work is going,” explained Michael Bennett. “We have been open to learning that together. We’ve not had preconceptions about what specifically we were going to do.”

From its meetings with stakeholders, the Foundation knew the partnership could do some tactical things such as staff professional development—which was a huge need directors had told them about.

The partnership envisioned and implemented a training calendar that improved communications with providers about training offerings and access. It also worked to ensure continuing education units could be earned and recognized both in New Hampshire and Vermont, given the Upper Valley bi-State region.

But the network needed time to develop organically on its own schedule before fully tackling those objectives. The up-to-now informal UVCCA decided in 2019 that, in order to accept grants, it needed to formally incorporate as a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization to be called the Early Care & Education Association (ECEA). It knew it also needed to develop a strategic plan.

After receiving official nonprofit status, UVCAA hired Amy Brooks as the inaugural executive director, and the Foundation no longer needed to directly support her involvement as a consultant.



Amy Brooks, a former child care center owner and director, was hired as the first executive director of the ECEA in 2019. (Photo by Becca Rose Photography)

Approach

Just after UVCCA's incorporation and name change to ECEA in 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic struck. As anyone in the field knows, this hit child care centers and family child care providers particularly hard.⁹ Should (or could) they stay open or not?¹⁰

The Couch Family Foundation quickly responded by providing unrestricted funding to ECEA so it could purchase and distribute emergency supplies like PPE, thermometers, and cleaning products so that programs could stay open and support children and families during this chaotic time. The Foundation also provided unrestricted funding support to the providers that remained open. Throughout the pandemic, the Foundation was in close communication with the ECEA to ensure they could be responsive to the needs of the field.

The ability of the ECEA to respond immediately during the early months of the pandemic further built trust with the field and attracted providers it had not yet been able to connect with. ECEA developed a reputation as an organization which, after receiving resources, quickly deployed them. They were also viewed as a central resource for timely information.

"It took time, but once the structure was there and the relationships were there, the funding just moved much more effectively because of those pieces being in place," says Michael Bennett.

Importantly, during the pandemic, ECEA Executive Director Amy Brooks grew from being a local voice representing her colleagues to a statewide voice representing the significance of the child care sector. ECEA had arrived.

"One of our key values has been an openness to not know exactly where the work is going."

– Michael Bennett, Program Partner



Danielle Dube completed her child development associate credential with support from the ECEA throughout the pandemic. (Photo courtesy of ECEA)

Approach

Philanthropic principles in action: What we learned

The evolution of the network that became ECEA did not always progress smoothly. Setbacks were encountered; mistakes were made. At times, progress seemed slow.

However, the impact that ECEA is having in the ECE ecosystem in the Upper Valley has met and perhaps exceeded the Foundation's expectations. In other regions of New Hampshire, the model is getting attention and replication is being discussed.

Reflecting on the past years, the Foundation and ECEA identified five key operating principles from the collaborative partnership built together over the course of the work:

Listen first: Ask stakeholders what they need to drive solutions. Then take relevant action to support them and address those needs.

Build trust and authentic, collaborative relationships: Invest in relationships. Building trust takes time but is crucial for sustainable impact.

Develop a supportive network for all: Effective networks provide collegial and emotional support to both early educators and leaders as well as provide access to meaningful professional development opportunities.

Innovate through provider-led solutions: Support provider-led initiatives as sources of innovative solutions. Empower those on the ground to lead and shape the interventions that can solve their problems. Accept and allow for mistakes to be made to support continued learning and increased effectiveness in program approach.

Be patient and flexible: Allow for adaptive strategies that can respond to emerging needs. Be willing to stick with it for the long term. Resource at a level that meets the need. Deploy resources with an entrepreneurial mindset and don't be afraid to take risks.

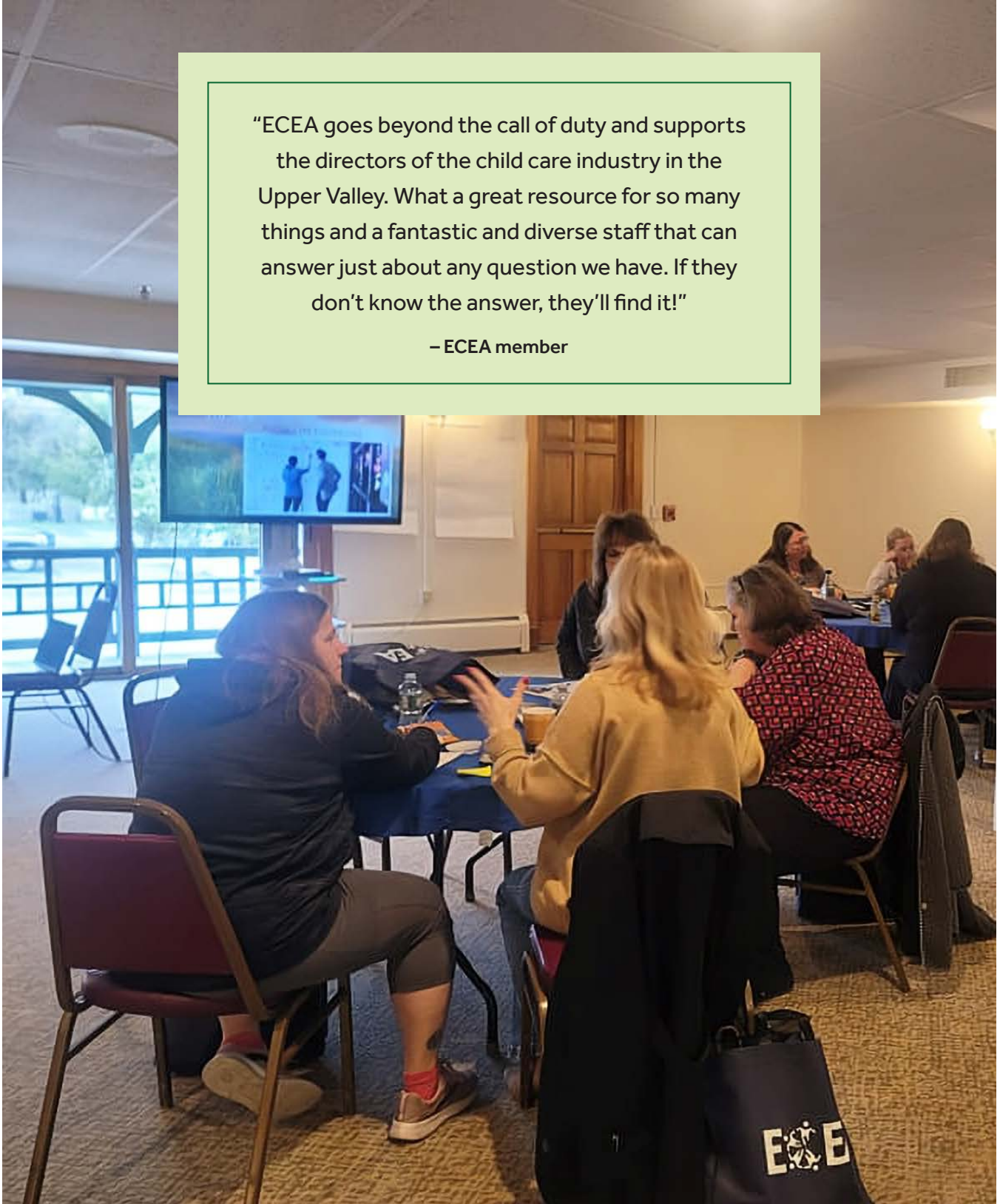


The ECEA's network of early childhood education leaders from the Upper Valley and Couch Family Foundation partners lay the groundwork for the ECEA's work at the 2019 Core Values Retreat. (Photo courtesy of ECEA)

Impact

“ECEA goes beyond the call of duty and supports the directors of the child care industry in the Upper Valley. What a great resource for so many things and a fantastic and diverse staff that can answer just about any question we have. If they don’t know the answer, they’ll find it!”

– ECEA member



Resiliency and Managing Stress with Heather Gunnell. (Photo courtesy of ECEA)

Impact

With the Couch Family Foundation’s support, the Early Care & Education Association has evolved from its roots as a regional, member-driven director’s network supporting local providers, to become a leading early care and education nonprofit advancing innovative approaches to workforce development, operational improvement and provider-led advocacy.



ECEA staff, left to right: Meg O’Leary, Katie Hopps, Amy Brooks, Andrea Dauphinais, Katie Jenks, Tanika Beauchemin.
(Photo by Becca Rose Photography)

Enhanced multi-level collaboration and support

The ECEA now includes more than 120 participating centers and family child care providers. Center directors and their staff members, and family child care programs, no longer feel isolated but are part of a supportive community working together to solve common problems. Significantly, comparatively fewer providers closed in the Upper Valley during the pandemic than in other parts of New Hampshire and Vermont.¹¹

“It’s a partnership at every level—from the directors to their teaching staff, to our mentoring, and to directors agreeing on a teacher substitute pool structure and how

that will operate in the best interest of everybody,” says Amy Brooks.

An eight-member steering committee guides ECEA’s work. The organization now employs seven staff members. It provides business coaching and technical assistance to its network of members helping providers to understand their budgets, and to know what they can charge and what they should be charging for their services.

“Core relationships among ECEA member directors were built at meetings, retreats, and trainings,” says Deborah

Impact

Kerwin, an ECEA executive committee member who runs Potter's House School and Child Care Center in Hartford, Vermont.

"We didn't have to be afraid that someone was going to take an idea and run away with it. There are all kinds of ideas that we all can bring to the table and share that are not going to *take* from your center, but will *add* to my center," Kerwin adds.

After first focusing on a child care center-based network, in 2020 ECEA applied for and was awarded a New

Hampshire Preschool Development Grant to build an additional regional network of family child care providers. The purpose of the federally funded, state administered grant program is to build New Hampshire's early childhood systems. ECEA also was awarded funding by [HomeGrown](#), a national funders collaborative working to build comprehensive networks for family child care.

"What we learned is that center-based and home-based settings are not the same thing. The family child care providers wanted their own network. They wanted to meet with their peers," notes Brooks.



The 2024 ECEA Fall Directors Retreat at the Bluewater Lodge in Andover, New Hampshire. "Core relationships among ECEA member directors were built at meetings, retreats, and trainings," says Deborah Kerwin, an ECEA executive committee member who runs Potter's House School and Child Care Center in Hartford, Vermont. (Photo by Mary Johanna Brown)

Impact

Focus innovation on developing the ECE workforce

ECE staff recruitment and preparation has been a long-term issue in the field due to low pay, few benefits, and stressful working conditions.¹² Additionally, in New Hampshire, ECE preparation programs at community colleges and career and technical programs in high schools were closed, limiting the pipeline of early educators and leaders. Upper Valley programs and providers were struggling with finding staff years before the Couch Family Foundation became involved. But with its support, the ECEA was able to develop a strategy to address this important issue directly.

Over many months, Amy Brooks and her team engaged with workforce development experts, such as [JVS Boston](#) and [Neighborhood Villages](#) to understand what interventions might best support new entrants into the field.

What emerged was a highly responsive, child interaction-focused, college credit-level training that provides more than 50 hours of classroom experience and leads to multiple pathways for advancement in the field.

The ECEA's workforce development strategy

Building from prior field learning, and with the financial backing and thought partnership of the Foundation, in January 2023, ECEA launched a workforce development strategy integrating a comprehensive suite of components to create an ecosystem of needed professional supports.



Early Childhood Observation Site

An immersive educational ecosystem where educators-in-training gain practical classroom experience, bridging theory with real-world application through over 50 hours of observation and student-teaching under the guidance of experienced mentors. This hands-on approach enhances both the learning of mentees and the mentoring skills of lead teachers.



Pre-Hire Workforce Training

Pre-Hire Workforce Training prepares aspiring early educators through coursework and practical experience to earn the Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential. Graduates gain essential skills and qualify for NH or VT LEVEL-II Teacher Credentials, equipping them to excel in early childhood education.



Lead-Teacher Mentor Training

Lead-Teacher Mentor Training equips experienced teachers with mentoring skills through 16 hours of pedagogy training, 12 months of coaching, and facilitated peer cohorts, enhancing their ability to guide early-career professionals while improving their own effectiveness. Participants gain 14 months of mentor training and coaching, with potential access to 3 credits in Mentoring and Leadership.

Promoting a career ladder pipeline

1. An Early Childhood Observation Site for those interested in the field to preview and experience what it's about. "People cannot learn early childhood from a book or a college course," says Amy Brooks. "They need practicum time. 'Hands-off observation' we call it. They observe and then we help them unpack what they saw and how the teachers managed it."

Participants receive a guided 50-hour orientation to the field, gaining experience under the guidance of trained mentors. Participants are paid a stipend for their participation. If they then want to pursue working in the field they move to the 10-week Career Cultivator program.

2. Career Cultivator: Initial Pre-Hire Workforce Development. This 10-week, three-phase training program provides entry-level education as an initial professional pipeline step to provide knowledge and practical experience to aspiring early educators. Graduates earn six ECE college education credits from NH Technical Institute and graduate ready to begin a career as an early educator.

Through coursework and experiential learning, participants receive training to gain initial competency in an array of topics such as child development, curriculum design, classroom management, teaching strategies, cultural competency, and professional ethics as well as essential skills including pediatric CPR, first aid, and health and safety training.

Elements of professional behavior and work ethics from time management to addressing grievances are also discussed. Participants are taken to a local used clothing store and provided with appropriate work outfits. "We want to model that dressing appropriately for work does not have to cost a lot of money," Brooks notes.

Career Cultivator participants receive a significant stipend for their participation and a bonus upon completion of each phase. If they choose, program graduates may later work towards earning the nationally recognized Child Development Associate (CDA) credential.

Because the Career Cultivator was designed by them, local



The Career Cultivator is a 10-week, three-phase training program that provides entry-level education as an initial professional pipeline step to provide knowledge and practical experience to aspiring early educators. (Photo: Valley News / Report For America - Alex Driehaus)

Impact

“Women in my training cohort were all in agreement that without this program we would never have taken the leap, because otherwise we’d have had to make a huge commitment before we knew if we even liked the work.”

– Amber Wright, a Career Cultivator graduate, who started work at a center one day after graduation and is now certified as a lead teacher after completing the CDA for Success program.



center directors are saved a huge amount of time in hiring graduates because applicants arrive at their interview with a folder in hand containing all the documentation they need to be hired.

This includes documentation of their early childhood related trainings, their resume, college transcript, their background check as well as completed job applications (when appropriate) and other employment paperwork.

Graduates who may not be ready to work full time due to family commitments or other circumstances can enter the ECEA's substitute teacher pool, and again are easy to hire because they arrive fully qualified to work and with all necessary documentation in hand.

“Women in my training cohort were all in agreement that without this program we would never have taken the leap, because otherwise we’d have had to make a huge commitment before we knew if we even liked the work,” comments Amber Wright, a Career Cultivator graduate.

The day after Wright graduated from the program she started work at a center and is now certified as a lead teacher after completing the CDA for Success program (see next column).

An **evaluation** of the initial Career Cultivator pilot documented that 82% of program participants graduated from the program; and 100% of program graduates said they would not have entered the early childhood education field without the opportunity to participate.

3. Child Development Associate (CDA). After the pre-hire training, earning the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential is the next step in the professional pipeline as part of the ECEA's workforce development strategy. The nationally recognized credential is a traditional entry-level stepping stone for ECE professionals working toward becoming a qualified teacher in the field.

In 2020, the Foundation and the Mascoma Bank Foundation provided a grant to ECEA for bulk purchasing for CDA licensing and to hire a staff person to serve as a coach/mentor for students to encourage CDA coursework completion.

To be accepted into the CDA program, applicants must have 480 hours of age-group appropriate classroom experience and complete 120 hours of formal early childhood education.* ECEA Career Cultivator graduates are approaching the threshold for acceptance into the CDA program.

* The online CDA certification coursework takes 5-7 months to complete at 5-6 hours a week of online study.

Impact

Additional requisite supports for the ECE workforce

Lead-Teacher Mentor Training

ECEA's members knew they needed to train mentors to build center-level capacity to support and coach new entrants into the field. The goal is to support quality, early educator development, and, equally important, lead-teacher retention.

This 18-month program focuses on building mentoring competencies to equip seasoned teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to provide technical assistance and professional guidance to early-career professionals, while enhancing these experienced teachers' own professional capacity and effectiveness.

The training covers topics such as best practices in

mentoring, building relationships, effective communication techniques, professional development strategies, and constructive feedback methods. Participants receive a stipend.

"It's a light touch," says Amy Brooks. "Mentors don't have to spend every night writing essays. It's more about engagement, trying something and then unpacking it. Now, when a new hire starts work, the mentor understands adult learning theory and understands how best to work with that adult."

The mentor teachers are a crucial piece of the Career Cultivator program as coaches to new entrants into the field.



Early educators and family-home care providers from the Upper Valley attend the VTAEYC Conference in 2024. (Photo courtesy of ECEA)

Impact

Filling the Gap: Substitute Teacher Pool

Given the challenges in the COVID-19 pandemic,¹³ ECEA's network staff reported burning out and needing time off to continue to be responsive to the field. Center directors firmly rejected a suggestion for workshops on deep breathing and mindfulness, asking instead for substitute teachers so that they could give their staff the time off they needed.

Responding to this need, ECEA created a regional substitute teacher pool. Career Cultivator program participants enter the substitute pool after week five of their training and are available to work as needed in ECEA member centers.

Importantly, as previously noted, they arrive for an assignment with all the documentation a director needs to hire them. Career Cultivator program graduates who may not be able to work full time are also enrolled in the pool.

"We have the only effective substitute teacher pool that I am aware of," notes Amy Brooks. "It meets the needs of both the new candidates and the center directors. A lot of our graduates cannot go from zero hours to 40-hours-a-week in early child care. It's a lot of work and you have to build up to it."

Results from the ECEA's workforce development strategy

"The Early Care & Education Association's Workforce Building Strategy pilot has demonstrated considerable potential, yielded encouraging results, and left positive impressions. It is evident that the organization has made significant strides in addressing key challenges in the early care and education sector."

– Findings from [Cultivating Excellence: A Comprehensive Evaluation of the Early Care & Education Association's Workforce Building Strategy](#).

100%

Percentage of Career Cultivator graduates who reported they would not have entered the field without the program

34 of 36

Career Cultivator students successfully completed their training with essential competencies and a pathway to a Level-I credential required for successful entry into the workforce

8

Children's Center of the Upper Valley teachers who completed the Lead-Teacher Mentor Training program with advanced competencies and pending access to 3 credits in Mentoring and Leadership

Interviewees voiced immense pride in their contribution in shaping the design and execution of the pilot program.

Impact

Solid organizational governance & infrastructure

The incorporation of the Early Care & Education Association as a registered 501(c)(3) organization with a solid governance structure was designed to ensure long-term sustainability and continued impact.

With the foundation of sustained, unrestricted Couch Family Foundation funding, the ECEA had capacity to grow as an organization and also to leverage additional financial resources to further support the work.

One of the four goals in ECEA's strategic plan is to "assure that the ECEA is a strong and sustainable organization that is able to carry out its mission."

This includes:

- Building and sustaining a paid staffing infrastructure.
- Continuing to create a sustainable funding plan to support the ECEA's staffing and programs.
- Maintaining a healthy governance and leadership structure with clear board, committee, and staff roles.



Beth and Kaylee Felix of Little Folks Day Care in Enfield, one of the oldest run Family Child Care providers in New Hampshire, at the ECEA booth at the Cornish Fair. Tabling is just one of the ways that ECEA works to recruit new ECE providers in the Upper Valley. (Photo courtesy of ECEA)

Impact

ECEA has begun to add additional expertise to its board. It recruited several retired center directors and an independent consultant who has public school administration experience. It plans to add additional members with human resource, finance and previous board experience and expertise to support its long-term growth and sustainability.

Attracting outside funding has always been an expectation to ensure ECEA's sustainability over time. After having been incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization for only seven months, ECEA applied for and was awarded a NH Preschool Development Grant to build out a network of family child care providers, in addition to its center-based network. The purpose of the federally funded, state administered grant program is to build New Hampshire's early childhood serving systems.

ECEA is leveraging additional support from other private funders including [HomeGrown](#), the [HOPE Foundation](#), the [New Hampshire Charitable Foundation](#), the [Mascoma Bank Foundation](#), [Dartmouth College](#), [Dartmouth Health/Mary Hitchcock Hospital](#), and is earning income through supporting initiatives to assist providers and provider networks outside of the Upper Valley.

"I think ECEA is very much a success. But there's still opportunity. We haven't solved the child care dilemma yet. So, there's always opportunity to be nimble and respond to the needs of the sector."

– Brooke Couch Freeland, Managing Director

In addition to grant support, ECEA has contracts with a regional development corporation and the State of New Hampshire to support its Career Cultivator pilot and its family child care network pilot.



ECEA staff at the kick-off to the Week of the Young Child event in Lebanon, NH, which celebrated early educators in the Upper Valley. (Photo courtesy of ECEA)

Impact

A crucial cultural shift

The Couch Family Foundation and the ECEA network have fostered a mindset shift among Upper Valley child care programs and providers from scarcity to abundance, encouraging providers to think beyond current ECE system constraints and to reflect creatively about what could be possible if they had the people, time, and money to accomplish what was needed to sustain and grow the field.

This cultural change is perhaps the most profound impact of the initiative.

“It was really all about thinking about what was possible, not to be constrained by a sense of scarcity,” says Michael Bennett.

“We asked ourselves ‘What if we really resource this in a meaningful way? What could we achieve?’ And those kinds of conversations would energize the Foundation board,” he said.

“Dick and Barbara Couch, who launched the Foundation, started and grew a highly successful and innovative manufacturing company. They are builders, they’re entrepreneurs,” Bennett added. “So, helping build an organization like that resonated with them. They understand these kinds of things.”

“As a result, over the years, the ECEA budget has been able to grow and scale with the work in meaningful ways. So again, these are all things that happened intentionally,” he said.



The 2024 ECEA Fall Directors Retreat at the Bluewater Lodge in Andover, New Hampshire. Providing professional development opportunities for ECEA members is an example of the cultural shift that investing in ECEA has made possible. “Child care center directors were used to meeting in church basements,” says Amy Brooks. “We were never treated like professionals.” (Photo by Mary Johanna Brown)

Impact



Scenes from Camp ECEA 2024 at the Hulbert Outdoor Center in Fairlee, Vermont. (Photo courtesy of ECEA)

The Couch Family Foundation's initial support of this initiative was \$20,000. As the ECEA's staff has grown to seven members, its programming blossomed, its mission expanded and the Foundation's support increased to \$505,000 in 2024.

Providing professional development opportunities for ECEA members is an example of this cultural shift. "Child care center directors were used to meeting in church basements," says Amy Brooks. "We were never treated like professionals."

ECEA changed that. Among its professional development opportunities, it sends cohorts of directors to national and regional conferences—all expenses paid. "These people make \$14 an hour with a bachelor's degree," notes Brooks. "We elevate them and treat them well. When they come back from a conference, not only have they been reinvigorated, but they've built very deep connections to other directors."

"The risk for everybody in this type of work is thinking from scarcity instead of from abundance."

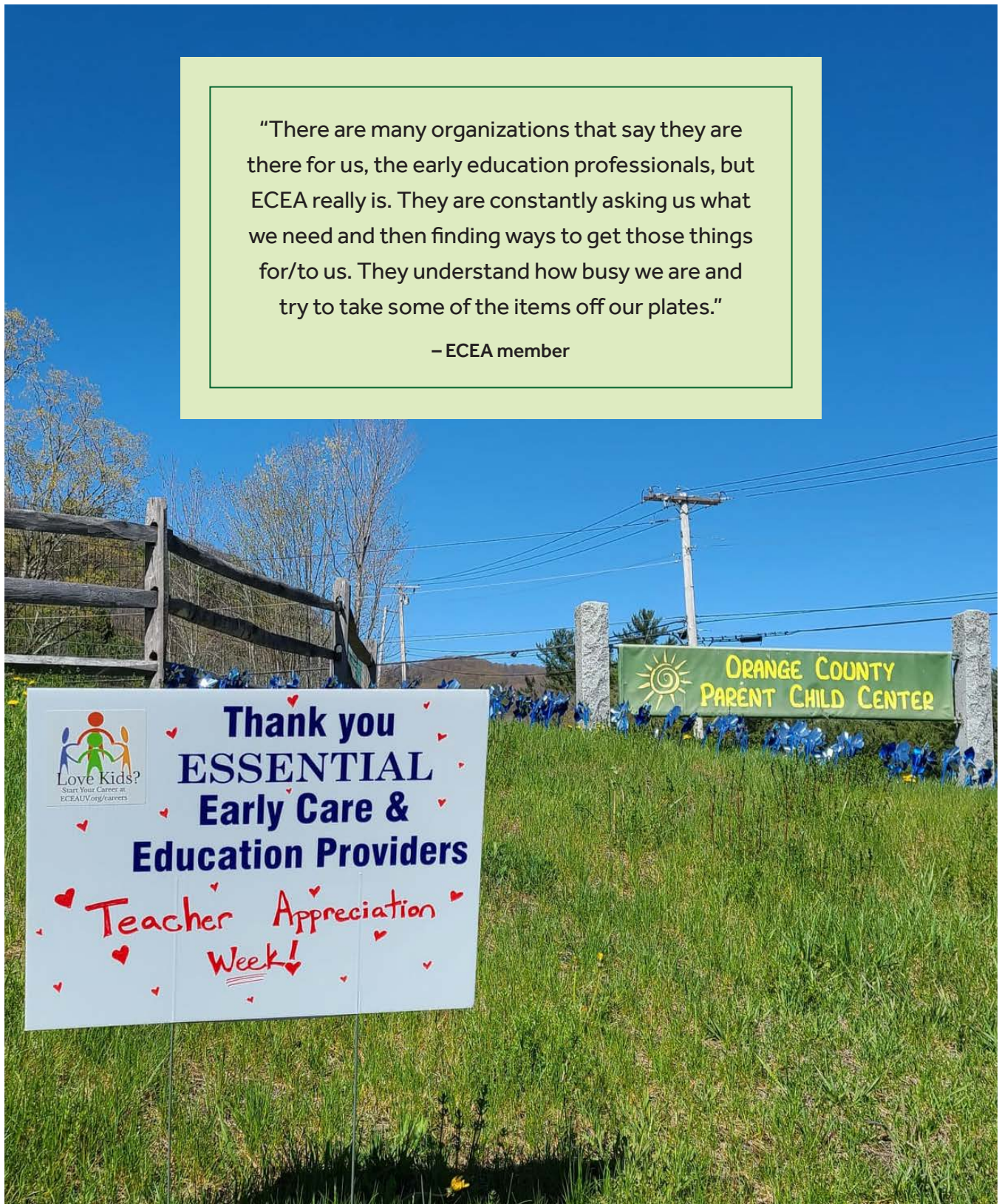
– Sara Kobylenski,
Community
Consultant,
Couch Family
Foundation



Conclusion

“There are many organizations that say they are there for us, the early education professionals, but ECEA really is. They are constantly asking us what we need and then finding ways to get those things for/to us. They understand how busy we are and try to take some of the items off our plates.”

– ECEA member



Teacher appreciation week at ECEA member Orange County Parent Child Center in Tunbridge, Vermont. (Photo courtesy of ECEA)

Conclusion



ECEA member Hampshire Cooperative Nursery School. (Photo courtesy of Hampshire Cooperative Nursery School)

The success of the Early Care & Education Association growth and impact on the field demonstrates the power of a provider-led approach in philanthropy, grounded in collaboration and trusted, authentic relationships with grantees and community stakeholders.

By listening to and investing in the needs of the community, the Couch Family Foundation has helped create a resilient, innovative network that supports early care and education providers and enhances the quality of ECE programs for children in both center and family child care settings.

Today, not only does the ECEA provide mentoring and technical support for child care providers, it is also bringing a steady stream of early childhood educators into the field.

It has new initiatives underway including a Child Care Scholarship Navigator pilot to help families access state child care scholarship subsidies.

It also plans a comprehensive child-care-program-strengthening project aimed at bolstering nonprofit child development centers from the ground up. Consisting of a team of consultants who represent multiple levels

of support (HR, finance, board development, ECE program quality and director mentoring) who can assess a program's current level of functioning across all areas of operation, develop a program improvement plan, and support the key elements of the plan. With this initiative ECEA anticipates gaining a deeper understanding of supports needed to move programs toward more sustainable operations.

Significantly, the success of ECEA illustrates the opportunity for early childhood philanthropy to replicate the collaborative principles to enable early childhood educators and leaders to exert their knowledge and leadership in provider-led solutions to further build and scale high-quality ECE programs and systems.

Early care and education, and the ECE professionals themselves, are important and are well worth the investment.

Endnotes

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About the Early Care & Education Association

The mission of the Early Care & Education Association (ECEA) is to support and sustain early childhood professionals by providing opportunities for networking, professional development, and advocacy.

The association works to ensure that every child and family has equitable access to quality early care and education, and it advocates for the needs of their members at local, state, and national levels.

ECEA's strategic plan includes goals focused on providing quality supports to early childhood educators, advocating on behalf of members, ensuring organizational sustainability, and engaging with family child care networks.

More information at ecea.org.

About the Couch Family Foundation

The mission of the Couch Family Foundation is to be a catalyst for change in the lives of children and their families by creating quality and equitable opportunities to help them learn, thrive, and lead healthy, fulfilling lives.

In 2023, the Foundation's Trustees committed to build upon what they had learned from their long-term work in the Upper Valley and expanded a focus on early childhood to include a systems change effort to improve early care and education policy in New Hampshire.

Within this new statewide ECE priority, the Foundation has a goal to ensure all children from birth to age 5 in New Hampshire—with a focus on low-income families and communities of color—have access to high-quality, affordable, early care and education within an equitable system.

More information at couchfoundation.org.