

My name is Zach Richie and I serve in Duluth as a director and teacher of an early childhood center in Duluth. I started out at the center in 2017 as an assistant teacher, after a ten year career as a television news reporter. I thought my life would slow down after the excitement of tv, but I couldn't have been more wrong.

The early childhood profession is wonderful and unique, filled with both ups and downs. You can have amazing highs like when you get to witness a child master a developmental milestone or like when they are so enthusiastic to something that they have discovered in the world around them. Unfortunately, there are also lows like when children don't get along or the tears, the sometimes many tears.

Early childhood professionals also need to wear many, many hats. We not only have to care for children, but many times have to manage relationships with all of our stakeholders whether they are parents, grandparents, our fellow employees, boards that may run the center, and last but not least the Department of Human Services.

The last stakeholder is where the relationship can improve the most. You as our governing officials have the ability to make the most change. While I understand the need for rules and regulations, some of these statutes are not serving the common good anymore. While their intent is to keep children safe, they are instead nothing more than paperwork in my opinion. Some of these statutes put into law have taken time away from what matters most. The children need their teacher to be focused and worried about them at all times. The stress of having to document nearly everything takes the joy out of this profession. I should be able to put forth all my efforts into raising these children but so many times I am burdened about always being behind on the files that sit on my desk.

There are nearly 2,500 ways that I could be written up by DHS when a licenser makes their unexpected visit. Thankfully, I have had no fix-it tickets the last two years. While a fix-it ticket carries little consequence, I still feel it is a public mark against any center and creates a sense of not being good enough for the director or person in charge of upholding the statutes.

I feel the over-regulation of child care will lead to its downfall and put us in more of a crisis than we are already in. Just last week I went to a preschool closing sale here in Duluth and one of the reasons she closed were the new proposed mandates and the Provider Hub.

Providers should be able to have some choice in how they run their centers. We can keep children safe and provide them a supportive learning environment without being burdened by unnecessary rules and statutes. The COVID years were proof of this. DHS scaled back many of its regulations and I had never felt so supported as a provider when they made that decision. We kept children safe then without those regulations, we can do the same now with similar support.

Here are some ways and things that we can change that could truly make a difference:

Ratios- I feel that the infant and toddler ratios are right where they need to be. However, if a provider feels that they could care for 11 or 12 preschool children (ages 3,4, and 5) allow them to do so. This alone could bring in additional \$10,000 for each child while maintaining a classroom where teachers and students can thrive.

Qualifications- It is extremely difficult to find teachers that are qualified. There are not enough of them entering the field nor can we keep up with paying them what they deserve for having a four-year degree. The bottom line is that we are caring for children. I have learned so much from my aides who are older and have life experience. These aides can more than handle a classroom at all times of the day. We currently have to document hours that we use inexperienced aides as teachers and are also limited to how many hours that we can use them in this capacity in a day. If they can care for children for two hours by themselves, they can do it for six.

Paperwork Requirements- I teach and direct. The files needed for DHS are time consuming. They take away from my actual work with the children. The fact that I have to have a water bottle policy is ridiculous to me. I once was almost written up for a fix it ticket for an Individualized Child Care Program Plan since my licenser said that I didn't review the plan, yet I am the one who created the plan, went over the plan with parents, and already had my signature on the plan in two other places on the document. I knew the plan.

Provider Hub- The Provider Hub has been an extreme challenge for providers and licensors. The way information is entered is very tedious. So far it hasn't integrated well with systems like Develop (the education tracking website). For instance, it took me three hours to submit a variance. Prior to the Hub, it took me ten minutes to get my licenser all the information they needed to make a variance happen.

Licensing Modernization Standards- When I first heard news of this, I welcomed it and thought that providers would be getting some relief. I was wrong. I am thankful that this project has been delayed. There is too much time dedicated to administrative paperwork that would be required by these standards. I have highlighted some of these below, there are many, many more. I believe a more common-sense approach is needed.

-245K.30 Subd 2. Documentation that a name and face check has been completed.
Transition records are also required. This is unnecessary paperwork

-Subd 17- The prohibition of essential oils and chemical air fresheners? We need some type of aid in controlling odors

There are many more regulations that I could address, these are just the tip of the iceberg. Look at how long and numerous the new statutes and language associated with them are. I feel as if I'm judged more on how I can keep paperwork than I can care for children.

When speaking to industry leaders, a common theme emerged. You need to be in early childhood to fully understand it. Childcare providers are on the front lines each and every day. They need more freedom from regulation and the ability to make decisions that are best for their center or business. This job is not easy. My ask is that those in authority support their workers in this field. They are the experts. Listen to what they are saying and we can fix this childcare crisis on our hands. We do not have the time for more paperwork. We need the time to love and care for children. This is why we are here. Providers need to be “all in” in supporting the families they serve. Let’s not have a pieces of paper get in the way of that.

Zach Richie