



## **First Children's Finance**

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### **Planning Grants Fuel Growth of Vermont's Child Care Sector**

*The Learning Tree at SVMC and 17 other programs awarded grants to expand access and support working families*

**Vergennes, Vermont** — First Children's Finance VT (FCF) is pleased to announce the final recipients of the Vermont Planning Grant Project, a statewide initiative aimed at expanding future access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education. The grants provided support for a wide range of planning activities, from feasibility studies and financial analysis to architectural and engineering designs. Among the awardees is **The Learning Tree**, the onsite child care center at Southwestern Vermont Medical Center (SVMC), which will use the planning grant to develop plans for a possible renovation and expansion project at its Bennington location.

The Learning Tree currently serves 59 children from the greater Bennington area, including families from eastern New York and northern Berkshire County, Massachusetts. With the help of this grant, the program will begin planning a project to expand its licensed capacity to 100 children. Plans include adding three new classrooms, a new kitchen, a playground, and additional bathroom space. Five new staff positions will be created to support expanded enrollment.

“At The Learning Tree, our priority is creating a nurturing, high-quality environment where every child can feel safe, supported, and inspired to grow,” said Director **Audra Pradini**. “But we also know that access to reliable child care is what allows families to thrive and local businesses to function. This planning grant is an exciting step forward: not just for the children we serve, but for the parents, employers, and communities that depend on us.”

**Ronald Zimmerman**, Vice President of Support Services at Southwestern Vermont Medical Center, said: “As one of the largest employers in the region, we know that access to reliable, high-quality child care is essential to recruiting and retaining a strong, stable workforce. This planning grant represents more than an investment in The Learning Tree. By expanding child care onsite, we’re helping our employees meet their families’ needs while strengthening our ability to deliver exceptional care to the community.”

Vermont Planning Grants – made possible through a partnership with Let’s Grow Kids and funding from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development – provide a combination of in-kind professional services and a financial stipend to invest in future capital construction projects of child care. These grants build on the momentum created by Act 76, Vermont’s landmark investment in child care.

“Access to capital for planning is one of the most significant hurdles to growing child care programs,” said **Erin Roche**, Director of First Children’s Finance Vermont. “Projects like The Learning Tree demonstrate how early funding can help strengthen local economies, support families, and grow the early childhood workforce.”

Other grant recipients since the project started in September 2024 include:

- **Clubhouse Kids**, Morrisville
- **Edgar May**, Springfield
- **Franklin Homestead**, Franklin

- **Pittsford Village Farm**, Pittsford
- **Valley Hub**, Rochester
- **Neck of the Woods**, Waitsfield
- **Craftsbury Saplings**, Craftsbury
- **First Roots–Wild Roots, Milkweed Mountain**, Hinesburg
- **Learning in the Wild, Next Generation**, St. Albans
- **Mary Johnson Children’s Center**, Middlebury
- **River Branch Community School**, Duxbury
- **Twincraft Skincare**, Winooski
- **Common Roots**, South Burlington
- **Mater Christi School**, Burlington
- **Overlake Day School (The Children’s School)**, South Burlington
- **Planetary Art Institute**, Waitsfield
- **Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA)**, St. Johnsbury
- **Turtle Island**, Montpelier
- **First Congregational Church UCC**, Burlington

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## **About First Children’s Finance**

First Children’s Finance’s mission is to grow the supply and business sustainability of excellent child care. We help start, sustain, and grow child care businesses by providing business resources and access to capital. Our team works in partnership with the State of Vermont, Let’s Grow Kids, and other statewide agencies. All business services are offered at no cost to child care programs. Learn more at [www.firstchildrensfinance.org/vermont](http://www.firstchildrensfinance.org/vermont).

