



Date: Thursday, April 13, 2023

To: House Committee on Education

From: Aly Richards, Chief Executive Officer, Let's Grow Kids  
Jen Horwitz, Policy & Research Director, Let's Grow Kids

Re: Testimony on S. 56/H. 208 Pre-K Proposals

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Good morning. Thank you for inviting us to testify today in regards to Senate Bill 56 and House Bill 208 and their pre-K proposals. My name is Aly Richards, and I'm the CEO of Let's Grow Kids. Joining me virtually is my colleague Jen Horwitz, Let's Grow Kids' Policy & Research Director.

We are deeply appreciative of the work that your committee has done over many years to support Vermont's early childhood education system and ensure our youngest children have the strongest possible start.

For those of you who may not be very familiar with Let's Grow Kids, we are a non-profit organization that has been actively working in Vermont for over 20 years to strengthen Vermont's early childhood education system. The roots of our work stem from strategic initiatives to mentor family child care homes and launch pre-K pilots throughout the state. This led us to our focused mission to ensure that all Vermont children, ages birth to five, have equitable, affordable access to high-quality early childhood care and education by pursuing policy change at the state level, supporting people power by elevating the voices and experiences of Vermonters, and through programs by preparing the child care system for transformation by working closely with early educators to increase quality, expand capacity, and support the early childhood education workforce.

## Vermont's Early Childhood Education System

Vermont's early childhood education system is comprised of regulated child care, including family child care homes and center-based child care and preschool programs, and our state's publicly-funded, mixed-delivery universal pre-K (UPK), which may be delivered in school-based programs or participating regulated child care programs.

I'm sorry to report that the child care crisis in our state has never been more dire. And yet at the same time we've never been closer to a solution to creating a more equitable and accessible early childhood education system. Vermonters have made clear that child care is essential, and we can no longer afford to get by with small steps or half measures. We need an early childhood education system that meets the needs of our children, families, and early childhood educators, and supports our workforce and economy.

The foundation for this critical work was laid out and passed thanks to the legislature's good work in 2021 as part of H.171/Act 45 which laid the foundation for an equitable, affordable, and accessible early childhood education system in Vermont.

Act 45 set important goals for our state:

- Ensure that all families with young children have affordable access to high-quality child care and early education;
- Ensure that no Vermont family spends more than 10% of their annual income on child care; and
- Ensure that Vermont's early childhood educators are fairly compensated and well supported.

## Recommendations

### Expanding Vermont's Universal Pre-K Program

The good news is that the pieces are in place to turn the vision outlined in Act 45 into reality. As you heard earlier this week from Dr. Morgan Crossman from Building Bright Futures, offering publicly-funded pre-K through a mixed-delivery system is considered national best practice. In fact, according to data from the National Institute for Early Education Research, of all the states in the US that offer publicly-funded pre-K programming, only one state does not use a mixed-delivery system.<sup>1</sup>

We recommend that our state explore how expansion of our current mixed-delivery UPK program can support the vision established in Act 45. Few would disagree that Vermont's current program of ten hours a week of universal pre-K for three- and four-year-olds is insufficient. Children benefit from more hours of pre-K education, and working families certainly need more than ten hours a week of care for their children.

Our current mixed-delivery system is lauded nationally for our inclusion of three-year-olds and for relatively high enrollment of both three- and four-year-olds.<sup>2</sup> Mixed-delivery also allows families to access pre-K in community-based programs that provide full-workday, full-calendar-year early childhood education, which may be a better fit for working families.

### Governance

In addition to expanding our current mixed-delivery UPK program, we recommend assessing the governance of our early education system. Last year, Building Bright Futures released the Vermont Child Care and Early Childhood Education Systems Analysis report which provides the Legislature with clear guidance and knowledge to move our state towards a more equitable system in which every child has access to quality early care and education regardless of zip code, ability, racial or ethnic background, health needs, or family composition.<sup>3</sup> Let's Grow Kids supports the recommendation of the report to create a single, empowered leader in a position on the Governor's cabinet, with oversight over key early childhood education programs.<sup>4</sup> We believe that this will help to address the existing challenges related to the joint administration of UPK and help to streamline governance and oversight.

## Conclusion

The pieces are in place to turn this vision into reality. Thousands of business leaders, educators, community stakeholders, parents, and Vermonters from every corner of the state have banded together in this moment. Vermont's youngest children are relying on us to get this done.

Thank you for your time, attention, and work on behalf of Vermont's youngest children.

# References

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- <sup>1</sup> Connors-Tadros, L. (2023). Testimony to the Vermont Senate Committee on Health & Welfare: Slide 8. Retrieved from <https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2024/WorkGroups/Senate%20Health%20and%20Welfare/Bills/S.56/Witness%20Documents/S.56~Lori%20Connors-Tadros~National%20Institute%20for%20Early%20Education%20Research%20Presentation~2-10-2023.pdf>.
- <sup>2</sup> Friedman-Krauss, A., Barnett, S., Garver, K., Hodges, K., Weisfeld, G., Gardiner, B., Jost, T. (2022). 'The State of Preschool 2021: State Preschool Yearbook.' National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey: New Brunswick, NJ. Retrieved from [https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/YB2021\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/YB2021_Full_Report.pdf).
- <sup>3</sup> Patel, N. and Regenstein, E. (July 2022). 'Vermont Child Care and Early Childhood Education Systems Analysis.' Foresight Law+Policy and Watershed Advisors for Building Bright Futures: Williston, VT. Retrieved from [https://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Legislative-Reports/Vermont-Child-Care-and-Early-Childhood-Education-Systems-Analysis-Final-Report\\_July-2022.pdf](https://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Legislative-Reports/Vermont-Child-Care-and-Early-Childhood-Education-Systems-Analysis-Final-Report_July-2022.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> Regenstein, E., Patel, N.(July, 2022). 'Vermont Child Care and Early Childhood Education Systems Analysis: Final Report.' Foresight Law+Policy. Retrieved from [https://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Legislative-Reports/Vermont-Child-Care-and-Early-Childhood-Education-Systems-Analysis-Final-Report\\_July-2022.pdf](https://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Legislative-Reports/Vermont-Child-Care-and-Early-Childhood-Education-Systems-Analysis-Final-Report_July-2022.pdf)