

TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO: House Education Committee

FROM: Meagan Roy, Ed.D. (Superintendent, Washington Central Unified Union School District)

TOPIC: PreKindergarten

DATE: April 26, 2023

I offer the following testimony in support of expanding the provision of public-school based PreKindergarten programming for four year olds, and as input to the current draft legislation in both houses on childcare and early education more globally. It is not news to this committee that early education is a critical component of Vermont's overall education landscape, for improved student outcomes and educational experiences but also to support Vermont families and the working public. You've had the opportunity to hear much testimony about the value of early education for both of those reasons.

I would add to that testimony, however, a particular emphasis on the potential for schools to provide high quality early education experiences to four year olds in our public school buildings, as part of a continuum of public and private options for families. If appropriately incentivized, many school districts have the ability to deliver full day early childhood education, aligned with evidence based practices, by licensed teachers who receive higher wages and the associated professional development and benefits that public schools can provide. It can provide families with a no cost option for their children, supplemented in many cases by existing after school programs, and has significant potential for increasing capacity in communities that are well suited for this. In order to maximize this potential, I would offer the following comments on issues that arise when considering the expansion of school-based PreK programming.

Public School-based PreKindergarten Programming for 4-year olds

Equalized Pupil Count

Schools who are able to deliver full-day school-based PreK programming for four year olds should be able to count those students as full time pupils. The provisions of weighted pupil count for PreK students that were struck from the current version of S.56 but are reflected in H.208 (e.g., the ability to count any Pre K student or essential early education student receiving more than 10 hours per week of services as a full time pupil) are critical to public schools to increase their capacity to provide these services.

Implementation Timeline

Even for those schools with more immediate capacity to expand PreK programming for four year olds, a significant number of logistics issues are in play that require some time for thoughtful implementation. If expanding full day PreK programming were to be required, districts would need time to implement changes necessary to their physical plant and other requirements.

Streamlining Regulatory/Licensure Requirements

As noted in early versions of both draft bills, the dual-agency oversight and conflicting regulatory landscape that currently exists for PreK is challenging and would need to be addressed even for those schools who want to voluntarily provide PreK programming. Currently, the childcare regulations that exist for PreK are often in conflict with school-age regulations. Everything from fingerprinting requirements to training requirements for PreK are complex and contradictory. If schools are to be incentivized to provide programming for four year olds, the early proposals of single-agency oversight are essential. Many implementation challenges could reasonably be avoided if publicly-housed PreK programming for four year olds could operate under the same regulatory landscape as kindergarten.

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Concerns raised about the need to retrofit classrooms and make physical space changes to accommodate four year olds are, in my belief, related not to actual needs for retrofitting but rather to the cumbersome dual regulatory requirements. Primary classrooms that serve kindergarten students are already designed for young children and with the implementation of play-based programming in mind. The amount of “retrofitting” that may currently be required is more related to the need to implement both childcare and school age space recommendations - and could be alleviated with a streamlined regulatory framework.

Special Education Implications

I share the following both as a current Superintendent but also from my perspective as a former special education administrator. School districts are required to provide appropriate early childhood special education services to qualifying children ages 3-5. These services are currently provided in a number of settings, including school- and community-based early childhood programs, homes, clinics and in other community settings such as playgroups. Districts are allowed to make determinations about location based on student need and other district realities. Allowing and incentivizing full-day school-based PreK classrooms for 4 year olds does not limit the provision of such services - in fact, it may expand options for special education services. Districts would have the option of serving 3-year-old children in those programs, but they would not be required to do so. They could also develop more creative service delivery options that remain developmentally appropriate.

Deputy Secretary Position

In their original versions, both S.56 and H.208 created a new Deputy Secretary position at the Agency of Education. I believe this position is critical to the overall functioning of the Agency, and for reasons far beyond the implementation of new early education and childcare regulations. The responsibilities outlined for the new position (early education, special education and multi-tiered systems of support [MTSS]) require high level leadership and accountability. I believe this position is critical regardless of where the general assembly ultimately lands related to PreK. I offer the following comments about each area:

Special Education

Vermont education organizations have long questioned the validity of Vermont’s current model for oversight of special education. Having a State Director of Special Education position that is not at the Deputy Secretary level - in fact, is not even at a Division Director level - places a critical leadership role in Student Support Services in a place in the organization where it is functionally unable to impact policy, and (perhaps more importantly) may not attract a leader with the professional background and capacity to take on the role.

MTSS

In my capacity as the Chair of the Census-Based Funding Advisory Group, I have come before this committee frequently to share the Group’s concerns about professional development and leadership at the agency for implementation of MTSS. I believe the proposed Deputy Secretary position may well provide the leadership and accountability necessary to implement the ongoing recommendations of the Group:

1. Identify the evidence-based practices and framework for implementation
2. Design a multi-disciplinary model for professional development that would be accessible to districts at all levels of implementation

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3. Identify those districts that would need significant support in implementation so that professional development resources could be targeted
4. Develop an accountability mechanism for ongoing implementation monitoring that operates independently of a structure such as the Advisory Group (since this group is not the right structure for ongoing monitoring)

In addition, the State Board received recommendations during the Rulemaking process to consider the development of MTSS rules. Having Agency of Education leadership to be part of this process, should it go forward, would be critical.

Early Education

As noted earlier in my testimony, I've acknowledged that Vermont's joint oversight of early education has long been identified as a major reason for challenges in implementation. The creation of this singular position, as intended by the draft legislation, would provide the leadership that will identify redundancies, provide singular leadership and streamline regulatory challenges.