

2/15/23

Legislative Testimony to Senate Education Committee

Dear Education Committee Members,

My name is Rebecca Webb and I'm here to talk to you as a current Universal Preschool Regional Coordinator. My role is supported by a collaboration among ten Supervisory Unions. This position focuses on quality improvement, professional development, accountability, coaching, and policy. My days include supporting our region's local Act 166 school contacts, superintendents, and our community based UPK partner programs. Those community programs are located in family child care homes and in community child care centers.

As I prepared this testimony I drew on my experiences as a community based preschool teacher and director, my role as a public preschool teacher and as an itinerant special educator. I have a master's degree in Early Childhood Special Education and a second master's in Educational Leadership. I hold AOE endorsements in both Early Childhood Special Education and School Principal.

I share this background as a context for my testimony and my knowledge of early childhood systems. Acknowledging that there are many parts of this bill, I would like to focus my testimony on the sections specific to the provision of preschool.

I want to start off with a visual picture of Universal Preschool for students who live in the Winooski Valley Superintendents Association (WVSA) region. We have 49 community Universal Preschool partners and a preschool in almost every elementary school building across the ten Supervisory Unions. In total **over 1,400 students** living in this region are funded through the current Universal Preschool system. We partner with home and center programs and we have several students who attend preschool within neighboring WVSA Supervisory Union's programs.

Since 2018 we have had a unified partnership agreement so partnering programs only need to complete one set of agreements to receive Act 166/UPK funding from any of our ten Supervisory Unions. While the majority of our partnering programs are within the boundaries of the WVSA region, we have children attending programs in Franklin, Chittenden, and Rutland Counties.

You have heard from other experts in the early childhood field including yesterday's testimony from community UPK partners. Today, I would like to share the WVSA superintendents' reflections on S56 as introduced.

Many of our collaborative's Supervisory Unions do not have the additional physical space and staffing to offer full day programming at this time. We have depended on, and see our local community preschools, as partners in providing Universal Preschool to our region's youngest learners.

Our superintendents agree that bringing four year olds into our public school locations is a positive. It eases the transition to kindergarten, builds earlier relationships with families, and increases the ability to identify and serve children with special needs. When discussing repealing Act 166/Universal Preschool we need to think both on an early childhood level and direct impacts to the local public schools.

Physical Space:

Our school buildings are not designed to accommodate the unique needs of young students. Limited building space limits the creation of preschool classrooms. When classroom space is available; funding for retrofitting will need to be allocated to design classrooms which allow for students' basic needs. Things such as lower toilets, sinks, furniture, and playground equipment will need to be considered. New construction and retrofitting of classrooms is not a quick process and impacts local school budgets unless state level funding is allocated to offset these costs. The bill does not include a mechanism for funding these start up costs.

Oversight and Regulations:

While removing the current dual oversight within a school building is seen as a positive move, the inclusion of meeting the National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation feels like this only moves the current two regulatory systems to a different (and new) set of criteria. Principals currently need to ensure that the preschools in their elementary buildings comply with two sets of health and safety, staffing ratios and qualifications, curriculum and assessment standards. It is likely that the requirements of being NAEYC accredited will continue this duality in operations. If the current Child Care Licensing Regulations are removed, then adding NAEYC accreditation makes sense, however this implementation will require substantial early education knowledge and administrative support. The developmental needs of young children pose unique differences to health and safety, curriculum, and the use of play as a vehicle for learning.

Staffing:

Increasing the number of school based preschool classrooms increases staffing needs. To meet NAEYC standards, teachers must hold endorsements in either Early Childhood Education or Early Childhood Special Education. As you are aware from other conversations, finding licensed teachers at any level is difficult and the opening of more preschool classrooms within public school buildings will only increase this strain on the system. Our collaborative region, like many others, has worked with the Agency of Education to provisionally license both teachers in public school locations and in our community UPK partner programs. The requirement for paraeducators to meet the NAEYC standards may also make it difficult to recruit and retain staff that meet these qualifications.

Special Education:

The provision of special education identification and service delivery models are not addressed in this bill beyond the option of bringing three year olds with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) into a classroom space curated for four year olds. Placing a subset of three year olds in

a four year old classroom does not provide an education with chronological age peers. We are thankful that there is a funding formula calculation, but questions around classroom capacity and meeting student needs in an inclusive environment.

Fiscal Impact:

As you've heard in previous testimony, the .46 ADM (Average Daily Membership) has been one of the barriers to expanding many school based programs due to funding limitations. Costs of additional teachers and paraeducators (assistant teachers) as well as initial set up fees, accreditation fees, and construction are all above what is currently spent on a district's preschool program. We wonder if the increase to 1.0 will truly cover these costs. State education dollars based on child count will need to be supplemented with local taxpayer dollars and impact school budgets.

In Summary:

As a region we believe that changing the current model requires strategic planning for implementation. We are highly concerned about the timing for the school year 24-25 and the burden that this places on schools.

Resources:

I am including several resources that are relevant to these conversations and I am available to provide more information as requested.

[Vermont Early Learning Standards](#)

[NAEYC Accreditation Resources](#)

[BBF presentation on the status of Universal Preschool](#) Early Learning and Development committee 2/9/23 data from two regional coordinators begins at minute 36.

[Vermont Child Care and Early Childhood Systems Analysis](#)

[Vermont Early Care and Education Financing Study](#)

[Statewide School System Programs Survey](#) conducted by Meg Baker (ACSD, ANWSD, MAUSD) and myself (10/21)



Rebecca Webb, M.Ed.

Winooski Valley Superintendents Association (WVSA) Act 166 Regional Coordinator

rwebbsu@buusd.org

***WVSA Districts/Supervisory Unions include:** Barre Unified Union, Central Vermont Supervisory Union, Harwood Unified Union School District, Lamoille North Supervisory Union, Lamoille South Supervisory Union, Montpelier Roxbury School District, Orange Southwest School District, Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union, Washington Central Unified Union School District and White River Valley Supervisory Union