



To: Senate Education

From: Jay Nichols , Executive Director

Date:2/22/23

Subject: S.56

The Vermont Principals' Association supports school leaders to improve the equity and quality of educational opportunities for all students.

Officially, for the record, Jay Nichols, Executive Director of the Vermont Principals' Association.

It is my understanding that this testimony has switched as now we are being asked to consider the concept of a study committee to research the question of having four year olds in public schools. I don't think we should wait for a study committee to do what will have an enormous positive impact on Vermont children and our school system. So with that, let me share my thoughts on this issue and ask you to consider moving forward with an additional year of public school moving our K-12 system to a earlyK-12 system.

My testimony today is centered primarily on the part of S.56 that seeks to require public schools to provide what I term early kindergarten for all four year olds in a developmentally appropriate manner. The Vermont Principals' Association has been publicly supporting this policy construct for the last half decade. We think the time is now to make the necessary changes in Vermont law so that four year old students can have universal access to early childhood education that is of high quality and will include all students. And we think the best - and actually, the only way - to do this is to open up our public schools and require schools to provide for early kindergarten to all four year olds.

Under the current system, we often find that many of the students who most need high quality full day education are not receiving it. Many of our private pre k businesses do not have

licensed teachers actually providing instruction to the students. This flies in the face of research which consistently supports licensed teachers providing the instructional experiences and opportunities for these children. Although, many of these programs are moving toward licensed teachers providing instruction and we are glad we are seeing some improvements in this area, too many children are still not receiving the quality programming necessary to really move the needle. We believe now is the time to ensure all four year olds in Vermont have access to full day programs with high quality teachers.

The truth of the matter is that three and four year old students, with economic supplementation from the Education Fund, and from parents' pockets, are subsidizing the care of students from birth through three years of age. I'm not blaming anyone for this development - it is an outcome of the mixed delivery system we have in Vermont, federal funding and child care rules about how many children at certain ages can be served in a setting, and issues around cost of child care and low pay for child care providers. Our attempts at universal preschool in Act 166 have contributed to a model where some students have no realistic options because the 10 hours a week is not nearly enough to make a positive difference.

I heard testimony in Senator Lyons committee last Thursday and heard about waiting lists for day care providers. Well our schools don't have waiting lists. We take whatever students come to our schools and we make it work. We don't discriminate against any children; we accept them all. That is not true with all private day care providers or businesses. The conversations we are having now about four year olds is the same conversations we were having about kindergarten students decades ago.

Right now, we know that there are areas of the state with huge waiting lists. And many of those children on waiting lists are three and four year old students. We can in very short order provide a high quality full day pre kindergarten program that is developmentally appropriate for every four year old in Vermont. This would be especially beneficial to our most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and working class families that don't have the means to put four year olds in private day cares. This would be completely optional to parents just like Kindergarten is now. In 1997, we had over 120,000 students enrolled in K-12 schools. Today, we are in the 80,000 student population range. In the aggregate, we clearly have room in our schools.

If we require schools to provide early kindergarten to four year olds and fund them just like we do K-12 students through the education fund, we have the opportunity to actually move toward having the best education possible for all students. Want students more ready to learn? Put four year olds in our buildings. Want better literacy/reading test scores and results? Put four year olds in our buildings and fund it so that schools are truly incentivized to provide high quality programming - just like Kindergarten. We hear from principals all the time about how students that are in their in school programs generally do so much better than students who are not. The sooner we get eyes on and support for our children by trained educators, the better. Moving four year olds into public schools will accomplish this.

Many other countries already have early kindergarten programs. Research consistently shows that these programs benefit student learning, academic achievement, self-regulation skills and vocabulary development to name a few key findings of early kindergarten programs.

Even Oklahoma has added a four year old class statewide. Not exactly a state known for being a beacon of progressive education. But they have taken this bold step - in fact, their program started just before the turn of this century! And, they have longitudinal programs and research studies particularly in the Tulsa schools. And what have they found? What they have seen is higher graduation rates, more likelihood to go to college or post secondary aspirations, better overall school and after school performance for students who have participated in these programs as opposed to those who have not.

If we put our four year old students in developmentally appropriate programs in Vermont schools in front of highly qualified licensed teachers this could be the single most positive policy approach we could take to improve the lives of our children. Provide school districts with the same Average Daily Membership rate as we do for Kindergarten students and provide full day programs. It may hurt some private business owners (although I think that is doubtful especially when we already have waiting lists and many three year olds would gravitate toward these programs), it may not be popular with advocates who are using education fund monies to subsidize the private day care model, and it might not be popular with individuals in state government who want to keep control and are dependent on the current status quo; but what it will do is have an immensely positive impact on Vermont children. Now is the time to follow the research and put our four year olds in public schools (optional for parents but mandatory for schools). Let's seize the opportunity.

Notes:

Private Preschool Lack of Accountability

https://vermontbiz.com/news/2023/february/15/former-williamsville-preschool-director-cited-embzzlement?ct=t%28ENEWS_2_15_2023%29

§1-114) provided that all Oklahoma children who turned 4 on or before September 1 would be entitled to attend half-day or full-day Pre-K, and funding was included as part of the State Aid Formula. **Pre-K is not a mandatory grade**, and attendance is voluntary.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=ls+pre-k+mandatory+in+Oklahoma%3F&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjOzv3h2Jr9AhXAFVvFHdkHDdUQzmd6BAqfEAU&biw=705&bih=373&dpr=5>