



VCSEA Testimony to the House Education Committee on Act 166 & Act 77 February 25, 2016

Act 166

VCSEA members are committed to high quality Pre-Kindergarten experiences for all students. Readiness for learning, social engagement and communication all can thrive in high quality Pre-Kindergarten settings.

VCSEA members are often the primary administrators responsible for implementation. We have collected feedback from our members and feel consideration of the following points is critical as we continue to assess implementation of Universal Pre-Kindergarten in Vermont. There are some significant flaws and implementation challenges with the current law that need to be examined and remedied.

Positives:

1. Increased access to preschool for Vermont children with resulting increased enrollments and educational gains being reported.
2. Increased incentives for quality improvements in private preschools.
3. Increased connection between partners and school districts.

Challenges:

1. Parents with limited income often cannot afford to pay for the hours beyond the ten hours per week of funded Pre-Kindergarten in high quality settings. If working these parents are frequently choosing full day settings that are more affordable but are not pre-approved for high quality.
2. There is no legal requirement for resident districts to provide special education services to children whose parents chose to place them in pre-qualified Pre-Kindergarten programs outside the district of residence, the same right that other parents enjoy under Act 166. Preschoolers' access to special education services as early as possible is critical for maximum learning benefit. Providing these services outside the district of residence creates significantly increased costs in administration, professional services and travel, and makes the local district relationships needed harder to develop.
3. The ability to access preschools anywhere in the state endangers both school based and private programs in areas where there is little economic opportunity. We are concerned that dollars are leaving the local communities and going to population centers. There are few qualified provider options in some rural areas. Establishment of regions remains a challenge. Pre-K is a big cost driver when districts are both running local programs and planning for out of district placements.
4. Given increased capacity in the high population areas these programs are able to implement with fewer challenges than rural areas; inequity is the result.
5. Controls on tuition increases in private programs need to be in place to ensure that the money being added to the public-private partnership is primarily targeted for improved outcomes, not profit.
6. School districts do not have oversight over the quality of Pre-Kindergarten programs. It is left to the state system with limited resources and oversight capacity. Yet, limitations to consistent leadership and oversight over a continuous improvement focus in the diffuse private preschool system is concerning given our use of this system to implement high quality preschool.
7. Co-Lead agencies in the implementation of Universal Preschool is a challenge along with insufficient staffing at the state level to support implementation. Duplicative licensing and fingerprinting are two examples. Access to data around childhood outcomes continues to be cumbersome. Universal access has moved quickly and left gaps in state leadership. The experience of our organization's members reflects the difficulties in collaborative leadership. Struggles with implementation in the field results.

Act 77

VCSEA has an interest in the implementation of Act 77 given the impact to high schools across this state.

Positive Outcomes:

1. More students are able to find multiple pathways creating personalized learning through increased opportunities and options.
2. In areas where there is less opportunity based on the inability to have economies of scale, Act 77 has provided new opportunities for students they may not have otherwise had.
3. This law supports students who are economically disadvantaged or less inclined to attend college, a step toward making college a reality.
4. Experience and learning is provided in areas not possible in a school setting. Decreased stigma is then attached to doing high school differently. There is also less pressure for students to be enrolled in a sequence of upper level courses that may not be of interest or make sense for them.

Challenges:

1. Act 77 has created challenges with dollars leaving the school system causing schools to have to make hard decisions about decreasing opportunities even further in their own school.
2. There have been significant challenges with expanding opportunities internally, especially in smaller high schools due to the financial constraints created by Act 77.
3. This departure of funds and students could create the need for closure of small high schools due depending on how many students access early college.
4. In small schools, students who leave and are college ready in their senior year, create a stratification of ability levels – those who can, leave, and those who can't leave, stay in the courses at the high school. The gap between haves and have nots is increased. Transportation access contributes to this.
5. There is also an increase in competition for limited numbers of internships.
6. There is a challenge to putting in place the structures and human resources necessary to maintain student experiences and be assured they are meeting proficiencies within internships and independent studies; highly qualified teachers are needed to oversee this program.
7. The number of students applying for Early College is four times greater this year than last year and they seem to take everyone, reports one high school. "Is this in the best interest of students or is this a need to save the State College system" What should the criteria for Early College be?"