



VCSEA Testimony to the Senate Education Committee on Act 166, April 1, 2016

Overview:

VCSEA members are committed to high quality Pre-Kindergarten experiences for all students. We know that readiness for learning and social engagement can thrive in high quality Pre-Kindergarten settings. VCSEA members are often the primary administrators responsible for implementation of Act 166. We have collected feedback from our members and conclude that consideration of the following points is critical as we continue to assess implementation of Universal Pre-K in Vermont. In addition to the positives there are significant implementation challenges with the current law that need to be examined and remedied.

Positives outcome from universal Pre-Kindergarten for three and four year olds:

- Increased access to preschool for children with increased enrollments, opportunities and educational gains resulting.
- Increased incentives for quality improvements in private preschools.
- Increased connection between community partners and school districts.

Challenges faced by school districts:

Equity:

- Children from low income households are more likely to attend less qualified community programs that are less expensive and provide a full day of service to facilitate parental employment.
- Pre-schoolers with disabilities who are attending programs outside their school district may not receive special education services. 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.
- Vermont's residency requirements for education and taxation are not designed for this level of choice. Another concern is the potential lack of socio-economic diversity in the district programs resulting from the choices available for those who can afford it.

Access:

- The ability to access preschools anywhere in the state endangers both school based and private programs in areas where there is little economic opportunity. Fewer qualified provider options in rural areas results in dollars leaving the local communities. Pre-K becomes a big cost driver when districts are maintaining local programs as well as planning for out of district placements. Predicting enrollments becomes a concern. Large population areas have an easier time with implementation.

Efficiency and Sustainability:

- Controls on tuition increases are needed to ensure that the money being added to the private programs in the public-private partnership is primarily targeted for improved outcomes.
- School districts do not have oversight over the quality of area Pre-Kindergarten programs. The state system has limited oversight capacity. Within a continuous improvement focus the diffuse private preschool system is concerning given our use of this system to implement high quality Pre-K.
- There is insufficient staffing at the state level to support the communication and data systems, and program quality monitoring needed for full co-lead agency implementation. Duplicative licensing and fingerprinting, and accessing data regarding childhood outcomes are a few examples. Establishment of regions remains a challenge. Universal access has moved quickly and left gaps in state leadership with implementation struggles in the field resulting.