

Testimony to the House Education Committee
Prekindergarten Education and Child Development Programs, draft 6.1
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We all know the education and social and emotional development of our youngest children creates the foundation for a strong, healthy future. As educators, we also know that when children move into elementary school, those who have had access to high-quality, pre-kindergarten education as three-, four- and five-year olds, are better prepared to grow and learn for years to come.

Vermont-NEA is supportive of the current draft of the pre-kindergarten bill. There are a several components of the draft that we would like to address:

First, we know that for children to succeed, the quality of the pre-kindergarten program is vitally important. The strategic and targeted investment in programs that have four and five STARS, will mean that children and families who access the expanded CCFAP support will be enrolled in high quality programs.

Vermont-NEA members are seeing more and more children in kindergarten and the early grades coming to school with complex needs and family situations, many suffering from adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs. The earlier that these challenges can be addressed, be they social or emotional, the better. Now more than ever, it is good social and fiscal policy for the state to make targeted and strategic investments to ensure children and families are incentivized to access high-quality programs that will provide the best foundation for the future.

Second, the current structure of Act 166 does not truly provide for universal access. Children from low-income families continue to be at a disadvantage, as their families may struggle to come up with the additional funds beyond the \$3092 currently allotted to families. By investing additional funds in expanded CCFAP for pre-kindergarten it will help ensure that children and families who need the most support can get it. Access to transportation is another challenge for low income families and that needs consideration.

For the past two years, I have sat on Governor Shumlin's Pathways from Poverty Council. We focused a lot on the benefit cliff and the need to invest in families in a way that allows them to succeed and not jeopardize their financial safety and security. As drafted, the enhanced CCFAP investment will address the substantial cliff that families see in this program, while making strategic and targeted investments in high-quality programs.

Thirdly, the concept of a nondiscriminatory lottery system, designed to admit non-resident eligible children to a preK program if there is capacity after all resident children have enrolled, has merit. Additionally, it is important that families that move into a town with a public preK program during the school year are given the opportunity to enroll their children in their local public school, regardless of capacity. Any lottery system established must be fair and impartial.

Fourth, it is important that the district with the responsibility of educating its students should be compensated to perform administrative duties for that student, even if the preK program the student attends is out of the district. Special education accommodations may also play a role, and may incur additional costs for the sending district. We support the funding mechanism for the sending district.

Finally, it makes sense that the Agency of Education have oversight over all public preK programs, leaving the Department of Children and Families to oversee the private programs.

Vermont-NEA is fully supportive of accessible, high-quality preK programs, as you heard from three of our preK educators a few weeks ago. Our public school employees want what is best for our young Vermonters and see every day that young students who arrive in school having had a quality preK program are prepared and ready to learn. Thank you.