



## **Testimony to House Education Committee**

**Date:** Wednesday March 22, 2017

**From:** Robyn Freedner-Maguire, Campaign Director, Let's Grow Kids

**Re:** Proposed legislation related to pre-Kindergarten, revised draft 6.1 (17-1178)

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak with you today regarding this committee's proposed bill addressing Vermont's universal, publicly-funded pre-K program. My name is Robyn Freedner-Maguire and I am the Campaign Director for Let's Grow Kids. Let's Grow Kids is committed to ensuring that all children, birth to five, have access to high-quality, affordable early care and learning programs, including access to pre-K. We continue to appreciate the committee's attention on this issue.

As this committee knows, the rapid brain development of children ages zero to five means that there is incredible opportunity for learning and growth, but there is also great risk and vulnerability. Let's Grow Kids is concerned that the committee's current proposal includes changes that do not reflect the needs of young children and their families, and we are concerned that this would result in a step back, rather than a step forward for our youngest children.

Vermont took a bold step in the right direction when we passed Act 166. In order to ensure that Vermont's children have access to high-quality, pre-k programming, as a state we took a serious look at the needs of our youngest learners. We all know that the most critical time in human development is from birth to five and it is our best opportunity to help children get a strong start. With Act 166, we laid out a strategy that would yield transformational change, where systems are more integrated through co-administration and where communities are better able to serve young children by strengthening partnerships. The co-administration requirements of Act 166 fundamentally shift us away from the status quo of siloed system structures, and moves in a direction of more integration and collaboration between AEO and AHS, because it's simply what our young children need. Act 166 is transformational and transformational change takes time.

We understand that there have been challenges in the implementation of pre-k and this committee has asked the right questions to determine if we should make mid-course corrections. We also know there has been success across the state with the implementation of pre-K and before we make changes that have not been critically examined and reviewed for unintended and harmful consequences, we should take more time to monitor, collect data and better understand those challenges and to understand. We understand that the current system with shared jurisdiction has endured challenges. But we do not think that the current proposal is the answer. Just as we have looked at the challenges, we should take the time to look at what is working, including a closer examination of the regions where implementation of pre-k is successful and learn from those regions in order to build on those successes.

We are very concerned by the committee's proposal to bifurcate the current pre-K program into two entirely separate programs run by two separate agencies. We anticipate that this split will lead to more challenges, not fewer. It should be noted that across the country, Vermont is not alone in utilizing a co-

administration model to support the necessary collaboration and to ensure the best outcomes for children. Vermont would be moving backwards if we bifurcate the system.

Additionally, we are concerned about how the current proposal characterizes the qualifications needed by community-based programs to offer what we currently refer to as pre-K programming. First, by limiting it to exclusively center-based programs that have a 5-recognition in the STeps Ahead Recognition System (STARS) or 4-Stars with a plan to achieve 5-Stars in no more than two years. This would severely limit the capacity of quality pre-K programs, which means that children will lose out. Additionally, this move is incredibly disrespectful to the hundreds of home-based early care and learning providers in our state who offer high quality programming to young children. Many of these providers hold advanced training and education in early childhood learning and development and are just as capable of providing pre-K programming to our young children as center-based or school-based staff. These requirements also seem to be arbitrary, as, currently, school-based pre-K programs, under Act 166, receive a STARS rating, and not all school-based programs have received a 5 STAR recognition level. Why are we asking more of our community-based programs than we ask of our schools?

Instead, we should encourage increasing the capacity of quality pre-K programs so that more children will have access, not limit it. Limiting the definition to only 5 STARS center-based programs or programs that are 4 STAR with a plan to move to 5 STARS will certainly jeopardize access and may create a socioeconomic divide—the opposite of the intended impact of universal pre-K. Additionally, for decades, early educators have been offering high-quality early care and learning programs, including pre-K, and we should continue to recognize that home-based providers and centers are a critical part of supporting the educational needs of our children. The proposed draft creates an entirely new definition for center-based providers who would be eligible to provide what is considered pre-Kindergarten education under the current law. This attempt to reclassify the important role of early educators in a home- or center-based setting does not seem to be based on data or thorough analysis. This change would further complicate the systems of educational and development supports, instead of clarifying the system in a way that parents and providers can understand.

The benefits of publicly-funded, mixed-delivery, jointly-administered universal pre-K have been recognized across the country through research and experience. In Vermont, we know that more children are accessing pre-k since the implementation of pre-k. If we decide to make changes to Vermont's pre-K program, let's make informed decisions using data from the first full year of implementation of Act 166. This information will help us better understand family, community, and system needs. We do not have this information now as analysis of the first full year of implementation is not complete.

We thank the committee for your sincere efforts to help young children, but we urge the committee to engage more stakeholders and gather appropriate and relevant data before making sweeping changes to this important program. This summer presents the perfect opportunity for the committee and other stakeholders to implement the Blue Ribbon Commission's recommendation to have Building Bright Futures, the state's early childhood public/private partnership, to facilitate a statewide effort to explore and develop recommendations for a comprehensive integrated early care and learning system. We have the opportunity to get this right, and we urge the committee to slow down sweeping changes and allow for more examination of needs and opportunities in order to best support children. Thank you for your time.

