

Testimony to House Education Committee

By: Debra Taylor, Ph.D. Superintendent, Rutland Central Supervisory Union and Regional President of the Southwest Vermont Superintendents Association

Date: February 15, 2017

Focus: Early Education and Universal Preschool

Dear Chairman Sharpe and Members of the House Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today concerning early education and universal preschool.

As a superintendent of nine years and a career educator who started my career in early childhood education, I am passionate about the need for expanded high quality early education.

We have offered half day preschool education to three and four year old children in the schools Rutland Central Supervisory Union for twenty years. Five years ago, we examined preschool participation and noted that only one third of eligible students participating in preschool education, either at the school or through private high quality provided. At the same time, we noted that student readiness for kindergarten was declining. As a result we sought grant funds to initiate preschool partnerships with highly qualified providers and are now able to serve two thirds of our preschool students in this way. In an effort to reach all eligible students, recently, our school boards have approved the addition to our local budgets for FY 18 for the expansion of our preschool programs from half day to full day. We recognize the importance and value of investment in early education for our students.

In his address, Governor Scott emphasized three goals:

- strengthening the economy;
- making Vermont more affordable;
- and protecting the most vulnerable

He challenged school boards to focus on improving schools; and he challenged superintendents to think creatively about how to maximize resources.

I wish to address the need to review and adjust Act 166 to make it work better for school districts, qualified private providers and families, and to better respond to the goals of efficiency, affordability and making sure that children with the greatest needs had access to pre-k education.

I appreciate that the House Education Committee is considering a bill to make some useful adjustments to sections of law related to Act 166. The law supports my school system's goals of ensuring our students have universal access to high quality preschool education. However, there are four areas where adjustments to the bill are needed:

1. Designate the Agency of Education as the Agency responsible for administering all aspects of the pre-k delivery system when education fund dollars are involved. School districts who are administering and budgeting for funding should have one primary Agency with which to work, and that should be the Agency of Education. As noted in my introduction, our public schools have provided preschool education for twenty years and are now expanding our preschool programs to full day.

Of course, the Agency of Education can and should work with the Agency of Human Services where interests, programs and duties intersect. As previously stated, RCSU has been partnering with several high quality preschool providers for five years.

2. Supervisory Unions and supervisory districts should be granted the authority to establish pre-k regions and partnership arrangements with qualified private providers (through properly warned actions). While the suburban nature of our supervisory union lends itself to a broader region, including partners in Rutland City, this is not the best option for rural supervisory unions. Local determination regarding the better utilization of publicly-funded pre-k education resources will allow school districts and their partners to better respond to the local and regional conditions with which they are most familiar. Supervisory unions have been challenged to address access to special education services. In our region, we provide our private partner preschools with extensive professional development opportunities. This would be challenging for some supervisory unions with remote partners. This approach will allow districts to focus on strengthening partnership arrangements and program quality.

3. Given the goals of affordability and protecting our most vulnerable children, it would be prudent to examine the nexus of funding of both early care and education. Our emphasis should be on ensuring that our families and children with greatest need receive access to this public education opportunity in the most equitable and affordable manner.

4. As a supervisory union who provides public preschool programs beyond the publicly funded minimum of ten hours per week, we strongly recommend that the law be made clear to ensure that public schools can assess fees for services provided in support of a partial or full day program as a supplement to publicly funded preschool education. In other words, allow school districts to charge for early childhood services (not education) that are provided in a school based setting that are supplemental to the ten hours of education. This will permit districts to pro-actively respond in areas where there is a shortage of qualified private providers and support those of us who are in the process of establishing programs that will serve our children in full-day programs.

In closing, I wish to thank you for your commitment to universal access to preschool education. I believe that this is the best investment that you will make in education as every dollar spent in support of high quality early childhood education yields tangible and positive results. In fact, recent research from the Perry Preschool Project indicates continuing positive long-term effects of high-quality early childhood education on low-income 3- and 4-year-olds.

Overall, the study recently documented a **return to society of more than \$17 for every \$1 dollar invested** in the high quality early education program, primarily because of the large continuing effect on the reduction of crime. These new figures are a dramatic increase in long-term returns. Highlights from the study's major findings include:

- *Economic/Workforce:* More of the group who received high-quality early education than the non-program group were employed at age 40 (76 percent vs. 62 percent).
- *Education:* More of the group who received high-quality early education, particularly females, graduated from high school than the non-program group. (88 percent vs. 72 percent)
- *Crime Prevention:* The group who received high-quality early education had significantly fewer arrests than the non-program group (36 percent vs. 55 percent).

If you require further information, please feel free to contact me.

Yours in Education,

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