



Tuesday, January 31, 2017

To: House Education Committee
From: Jen Horwitz, Policy & Research Director, Let's Grow Kids

Testimony on the House Education Committee's Proposal Legislation Regarding Publicly-Funded Pre-K

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 Jen Horwitz, and I am the Policy & Research 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. For children between the ages of 3 and 5, this includes access to pre-K programs under Vermont's universal pre-K law.

In the committee's current draft bill language, there is a note citing that the committee is considering adding language addressing means testing to Vermont's pre-K system. I want to strongly caution against this move, as, nationally, efforts are underway to strengthen universal systems rather than scale back to income-limited systems. In a policy statement released last March by the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Council noted that nationally, "over half of low-income children enter kindergarten lacking the skills necessary for a strong start to schooling; (and) one quarter of their more affluent peers face the same challenges."¹ The statement went on to read that, "the good news is that high-quality early education programs can improve outcomes, narrow achievement gaps, and convey long-term benefits for children in school and life."² Over the past five years, there has been an increase in the number of states transitioning from income-limited publicly-funded pre-K programs to universal, full-day, full-school-year programs. While it's true that many states still utilize income limits or target-population-focused approaches, states tend to use these parameters as a step in developing capacity and partnerships with community-based early care and learning providers to scale up systems. Increasingly, universal access seems to be becoming the end goal in an effort to ensure that all children have access to high-quality early education programs, as noted in the Council's policy statement. Adding means-testing to Vermont's universal pre-K system would be a huge step back for young children and families in our state rather than a step forward. Ensuring that all age-eligible children have access to publicly-funded pre-K programming can be achieved through a variety of other strategies rather than scaling our state's pre-K system back.

An important strategy to ensure equity for children is strengthening support for Vermont's early care and learning system as a whole. More than 70% of Vermont children birth to five have all available parents in the labor force, meaning that these children are likely to need some form of child care. While this committee's bill cites that extended pre-K-type services could be provided in school-based settings for children who are age-eligible for pre-K under Act 166 and who also need child care or continued services once their 10 hours a week of publicly-funded pre-K is over, an important factor in this equation is not just access to child care or continued pre-K programming, but the affordability piece of this programming. Vermont's Child Care Financial

¹ Council of Chief State School Officers, *Equity Starts Early: How Chiefs Will Build High-Quality Early Education*. March 2016. <http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2016/EquityStartsEarly3242016.pdf>

² Ibid

Assistance Program, known as CCFAP, plays an important role in the affordability piece of the equation but the program has been chronically underfunded for years, leaving significant barriers for families. Currently, a middle income family with an infant and a pre-K-eligible preschooler that is income-eligible for CCFAP can still spend 25% - 38% of their income on child care with financial assistance. This significant cost is due to chronic underfunding in CCFAP, which has created a serious misalignment between the tuition assistance rates paid by the program and the child care or preschool tuition rates actually charged by providers. Currently, tuition assistance rates paid by CCFAP are based on rates charged by providers in 2008 and 2009. This means that providers either have to operate at a loss or ask families who already need financial support to cover the difference. While the Governor's recent proposal addresses some of the funding gaps in the program, it does not address the funding gap in tuition assistance rates for preschool-age children, and the Governor's proposal would need to be increased from \$7.5 million to \$10.5 million to address misalignment in rates for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers; keep eligibility for the program aligned with current poverty guidelines; and account for annual program cost increases.

Finally, as you've heard from members of the Blue Ribbon Commission, pre-K represents one important piece of Vermont's early care and learning system, and it was the recommendation of the commission that Vermonters come together this year, under the leadership of Building Bright Futures, to investigate, design, and implement a stronger, more equitable high-quality and affordable early care and learning system for all Vermont children birth to five. We appreciate the attention this committee has given to the important issue of the early education of Vermont's young children, but we encourage this committee to consider ways to strengthen and better support our pre-K programs within the context of broader systems change work being undertaken so that we can collectively address issues of quality, equity, access, and affordability and not move forward with changes to the system this year.

Thank you very much for your time.