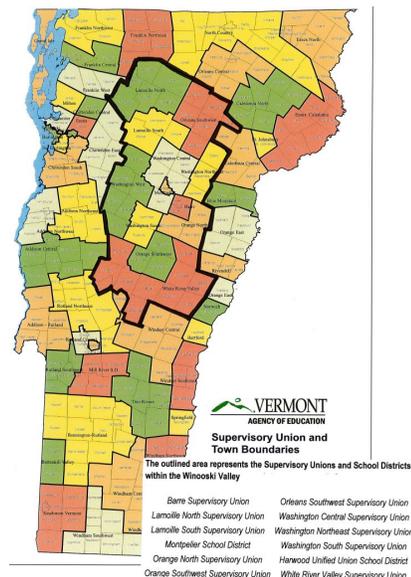


Sandra Cameron, M.Ed, MOT, Act 166 Regional Coordinator, Barre SU Director of Early Education  
Prekindergarten testimony  
February 14, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today with regard to prekindergarten.

My name is Sandra Cameron. I have been serving children and families in Vermont for 18 years; as a pediatric Occupational Therapist, a licensed Early Childhood Special Educator and as a School Administrator. As the Early Education Director in the Barre Supervisory Union, I oversee 2 public prekindergarten programs, with 7 PreK classrooms, serving 210 three- and four-year-olds as well as 12 community-based PreK programs, serving an additional 50 students. I am a member of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children, and the Council on Exceptional Children-Division for Early Childhood, where I served as a board member for 4 years.

Barre was addressing capacity and quality long before Act 166, through intentional curriculum, instruction and assessment and through implementation of the Gold Standards outlined in Vermont's Framework for Early Childhood Comprehensive Assessment (Appendix A). With the implementation of Act 166, I was forced to halt other important work in order to manage a very complex law. Recognizing a statewide need, I believed that the right thing to do was work toward standardization and efficiency by coordinating Act 166 in a larger region. Since July, I have been in the role of Act 166 Regional Coordinator for twelve Supervisory Unions/School Districts, known as the Winooski Valley Superintendents Association (WVSA). The WVSA represents about one-fifth of the State of Vermont and encompasses over 2,000 prekindergarten-aged children. Over 65 private and public programs have agreements with the WVSA and they all have a standard contract, consistent payment system and common practice/expectations in place for the districts their students live in. In September, Secretary Holcombe presented the first ever Silver Cup to the WVSA for their collaborative and innovative work regarding Act 166. Here is some feedback from private providers:



“The centralization of administration for Act 166 through the WVSA has truly been a game changer. Questions are answered quickly and completely and standardization of billing will save me time throughout the school year. I am so grateful that this project was made possible.” *Samara Mays, Montpelier Children’s House*

“I must say how grateful I am that you've worked so hard to streamline this process. Thank you.” *Jody Lowes, Strafford Creative Preschool*

“...it would be hard to overstate the importance of this collaboration...It isn’t just streamlining that is important... we need common expectations...” *Joanna VonCulin, Puffer Child Care Center, Morrisville*

“...being able to submit one set of documents ONE time has made the beginning of this school year so much simpler. I feel confident referring parents to their school district because of the contact spreadsheet that was developed, making navigation of this new legislation that much easier for everyone involved. My hope is that this collaboration continues...” *Kristen Martin, Montessori School of Central Vermont*

“Any chance more schools would be added to the (collaborative) agreement for next year? Just know how much easier it has been this year with 1.” *Sherrol Potvin, Barre*

Early Education is the world I live and I am deeply committed to it. I fully support the Statement of Purpose and Applicability under the 2600 Rules: “...to provide young children with developmentally appropriate learning, and developmental experiences that are responsive to each child’s strengths, interests, and needs and aligned with Vermont Early Learning Standards.” I agree that changes are necessary to ensure this purpose. My testimony is presented from the perspective of Regional Act 166 Coordinator, recognizing that both public schools and private programs have worked hard to meet the standards outlined in the law.

**Now is the time to ensure that all prekindergarten children have access to high quality education.**

Through Act 166, Vermont has been successful in expanding the number of children accessing publicly-funded prekindergarten, increasing the number of licensed Early Childhood Educators, and raising the bar for high quality early education, which our children, families and taxpayers deserve. If we are aiming for positive outcomes, then we must implement the essential elements of high quality prekindergarten. The expertise of a licensed teacher is vital and while many children *may* be able to learn in different environments, research tells us that the most gain is seen when a skilled teacher develops intentional curriculum and helps children link new learning to their previous experiences (Minervino & Pianta, September, 2014). Having a licensed teacher “on site” simply isn’t enough. Our national organization, NAEYC, developed a Position Statement on Curriculum and Assessment, which highlights the following needs:

- comprehensive systems of curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation
- curriculum that is thoughtfully planned
- assessment, which facilitates
  - (1) making sound decisions about teaching and learning,
  - (2) identifying concerns that may require focused intervention for individual children, and
  - (3) improving educational and developmental interventions.
- connection of high-quality curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation practices with well-defined early learning standards

**Teacher Capacity:** Vermont is currently experiencing a high number of Prekindergarten programs; much higher than the number of kindergarten classrooms, thus the issue of supply and demand for licensed Educators. There is also an issue of economies of scale. A group of 15 children, generating PreK tuition in excess of \$47,000 is certainly sufficient to pay a licensed teacher for 10 hours per week. When that program has 2 classrooms of 15 children, the revenue is over \$95,000 and the

recommended practice of direct instruction by a licensed teacher for 10 hours per week would still only require part-time employment. The issue is neither teacher capacity nor sufficient funding.

**The current draft bill shifts far too much responsibility to the Agency of Education.** The shift to single-agency oversight may streamline and standardize specific aspects of the law, resulting in greater efficiency, and hopefully propelling the features of the law that are yet to be implemented (PreK monitoring, Prequalification revocation). The lack of revocation for prequalification, coupled with direction from the AOE Finance Manager not to issue funds when a program does not meet the standards, has forced school districts to use local agreements to enforce fundamental quality standards, such as the presence of a licensed teacher. If schools were not enforcing this requirement, public education dollars would be paying for a service that is not being provided.

The shift of roles from school districts to the AOE will have unintended results:

- 1) **The responsibility of the public school will not be eliminated merely by shifting contracts and payments to the AOE.** There are many education, health and human services provided to families through local schools. School Districts are responsible for ensuring access to rights, such as McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance, transportation, ELL services, transitions from Early Intervention to ECSE at age 3, referrals to other agencies, special education, etc. School registration is often when we detect that the parent is illiterate and needs assistance. We offer a backpack to a child without one, set up weekly food distribution and connect the family to our school health office, where a PA comes to monitor chronic health conditions. A shift to a statewide, online registration process will remove a very valuable connection between schools and young children and families at the start of their education, which is often the very moment we discover they need services. For some families, it will create a barrier to access.
- 2) **The complexity of family dynamics such as custody, homelessness, and residency are issues that school teams sort through and act upon everyday.** The number of staff required to successfully coordinate a statewide system that accounts for these situations cannot be underestimated. Understaffing will result in poor implementation.
- 3) **The public school-private program connections should be preserved by keeping local schools linked to their communities.** Many school districts connect with private providers by extending professional development, serving as mentors and coaches, providing the LSB for teacher license renewals, visiting children within the programs, etc. A disconnect between schools and private programs could weaken those links, negatively affecting children and families in the end.
- 4) **PreK education must remain under the ADM model and there should be access to increased ADM when programs offer greater than 10 hours.** All other grades are required to use this funding mechanism and it promotes forecasting for budgets and staffing needs. Many schools have been offering more than 10 hours per week with no additional revenue source. Funding beyond .46 will further promote increased hours, which is what some families are seeking.

Given the tremendous progress in central Vermont in just a few months of regional coordination, there is evidence that we can improve implementation of Universal Prekindergarten while preserving a structure that connects local schools to their communities. The visual below

depicts the **recommendation for delineation of responsibility**:

Task	Responsibility
<b>Statewide standard agreement</b> that clearly articulates fiscal and legal responsibilities, quality criteria, and a payment schedule	<b>Agency of Education</b>
<b>Statewide, detailed payment schedule</b> and process that aligns with recommended accounting practice (payment after service)	
<b>Statewide, online attendance tracking system</b> to decrease administrative burden on programs and provide school districts with necessary data	
<b>Standard PreK registration form</b> , used by all by school districts, requiring families to complete documentation once, regardless if they move to a new school district (except for proof of residency)	
<b>Implementation of a robust program approval, monitoring &amp; evaluation system</b> that reflects NAEYC Recommended Practice and the Framework for Vermont’s Early Childhood Comprehensive Assessment System	
<b>Mechanism for timely notification to families when programs do not meet quality criteria</b> , thus prekindergarten tuition cannot be approved	
<b>Utilization of current data points (TSGold) and the development of a broader data system</b> to measure usage, efficacy, and outcomes of PreK education	
<b>AOE’s involvement in prekindergarten education ends and local schools pick up</b>	
Finalization of student registration process (residency)	<b>School District</b>
Payment to private programs	
Reporting students on SD’s ADM	

Thank you for your time and attention to this very important topic. I am more than willing to provide additional information and share strategies as part of a collaborative effort. If this draft bill does not address the current challenges or worse yet, will result in even greater challenges, I urge you to postpone approval and allow time for a team of content experts, those of us on the ground level, to help guide the development of a bill that will address high quality early education that will yield the best results for our youngest learners.

Jacquelyn Ramsay-Tolman, M. Ed., CAGS, Dir. of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, Barre SU  
Prekindergarten testimony  
February 14, 2018

My name is Jacquelyn Tolman. I have been serving children and families in Vermont for 25 years; as a pre-K and first grade teacher, Early Essential Education District coordinatorspecial educator, school principal and now curriculum director. I am a licensed Birth - age 8 (or grade 3) teacher and also hold endorsement as a Special Education Director, Superintendent and Principal. In addition to my experience serving in public schools I owned, operated and taught for 7 years in one of the first full day, full year, licensed pre-K programs in the NEK. These positions have given me a unique perspective, as both a private pre-k teacher working in isolation as well as a pre-k teacher in a public school setting. I served the Lamoille Valley as Building Bright Futures Regional board chair, am a past member of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and a current member of the National Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and the Vermont Principals Association. I currently serve as both the English Language learners coordinator and the homeless student liason for the Barre Supervisory Union. Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today.

**Curriculum:**

We must deliver to our youngest learners comprehensive systems of curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation guided by research based best practices and standards. Our charge is to close equity gaps by implementing curriculum that is thoughtfully planned, challenging, engaging, and developmentally appropriate. If curriculum is well planned, executed with fidelity and studied through the lens of a professional learning community, the potential to close the equity gaps facing our most vulnerable children increases. This will not happen without oversight and alignment across grade levels. The first years of exposure to a formal curriculum are instrumental in setting children on a path to achievement or conversely, increase equity gaps. This will force students, teachers, administrators and learning communities as a whole to play a continuous game of catch up for potentially the rest of a child's academic career. Recent data shows that a third of our nation's 4th grade students are performing at below basic levels in reading. For low-income children it is much worse—49% are below these levels. This means students are unable to locate information, understand the meaning of words, and make simple inferences from text. Without these essential skills, students are six times more likely to dropout of school.

The recent accountability plan under ESSA has begun to focus greater attention on a broader continuum of learning. The connection of prekindergarten to the K-8 system is critical to that continuum. In the Position Statement from NAEYC, *"Children's learning experiences across the early childhood years (birth to age 8) need to be far better integrated and aligned, particularly between prekindergarten and K-3. Education quality and outcomes would improve substantially if elementary teachers incorporated the best of preschool's emphases and practices (e.g., attention to the whole child; integrated, meaningful learning; parent engagement) and if preschool teachers made more use of those elementary-grade practices that are valuable for younger children, as well (e.g., robust content, attention to learning progressions in curriculum and teaching)."* A proposal that separates PreK from the K-12 system does not promote this connection. As a result, we will miss an

unmeasurable opportunity to influence student learning during the years when children have the greatest growth potential. In order to make significant progress on our long-term educational challenges, we must use our knowledge about pedagogical changes and apply those to our everyday instruction in our classrooms. We know that the connections between metacognition and mindset are critical to establish as soon as possible and these strategies are often embedded in high leverage curriculum that is socially, emotionally and academically aligned for all learners. Pre-K students must be part of this “all learners” mindset in our schools. A comprehensive curricular approach that begins in pre-K is needed to ensure that children develop a solid foundation in literacy, math, social-emotional skills, as well as strong engagement in learning. When schools link pre-k education with the elementary grades, the gains that children make in high-quality pre-k are more likely to persist.

**Instruction:**

More than two decades of research findings are incontrovertible in establishing the connection between teacher quality and student learning. Twenty years ago, the influential report of the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, made teaching the core of its “three simple premises” in its blueprint for reforming the nation’s schools. The first premise of this report is: What teachers know and can do is the most important influence on what students learn. The effect of teaching on student learning is greater than student ethnicity or family income, the school attended by student, or class size. The effect is stronger for poor and/or minority students than for their more affluent and/or white peers, although all groups benefit from effective teachers and the effects accumulate over the years. Research since has continued to support this most important finding. To suggest that one group, our most vulnerable group, would not need our most skilled educators delivering instruction is contrary to the findings in the Learning Policy Institute report on the Building Blocks of High Quality Early Education Programs. The positive effects associated with being taught by a highly effective teacher, defined as a teacher whose average student score gain is in the top 25 percent, again, were stronger for poor and minority students than for their white and more affluent counterparts. For example, one study found that low-income students were more likely to benefit from instruction by a highly effective teacher than were their more advantaged peers (Nye, Konstantopoulos, and Hedges 2004). Another study in this same report found that the achievement gains from having a highly effective teacher could be almost three times as large for African American students as for white students, even when comparing students who start with similar achievement levels (Sanders and Rivers 1996).

**Highly qualified teachers and oversight with qualified administration**

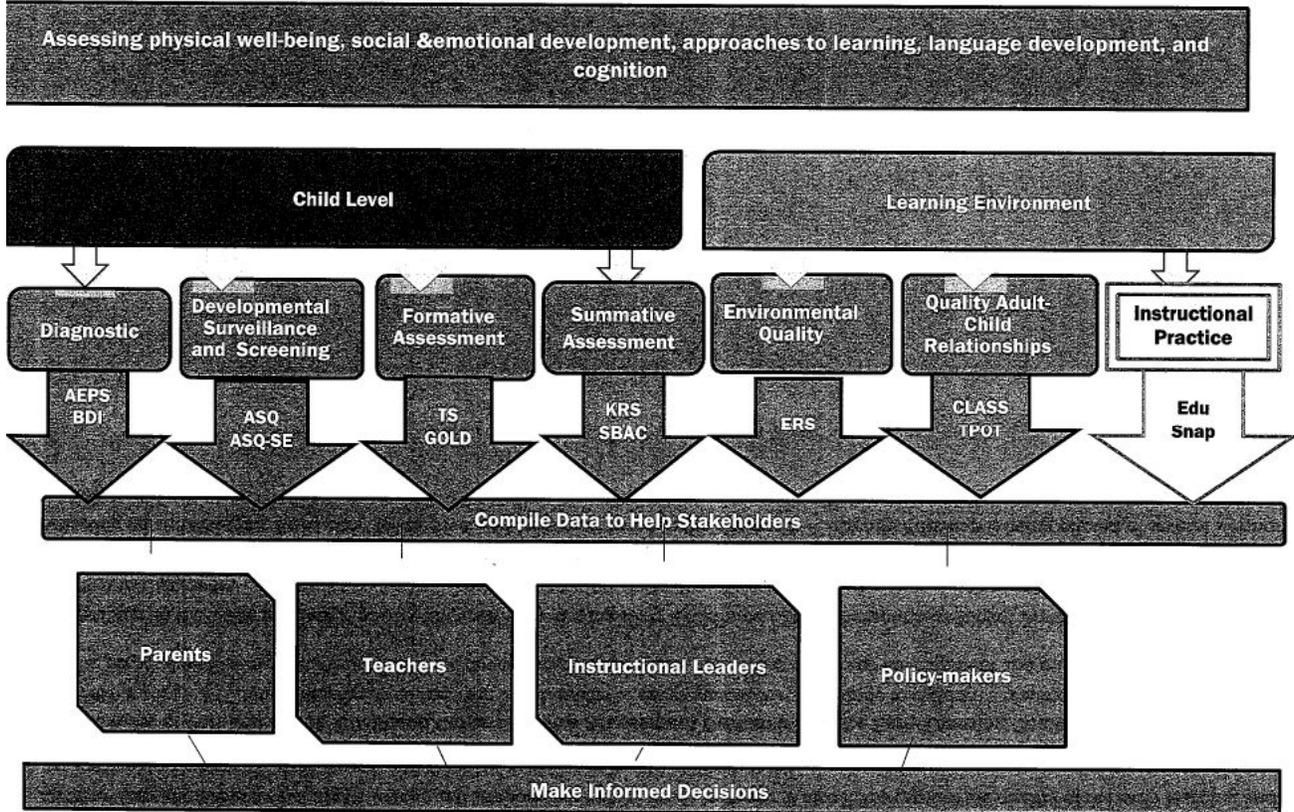
Quality of professional development, time allotted for professional development and data driven discussions are directly connected to the effectiveness of teaching. This effectiveness is essential for children to maximize their learning potential. These professional practices strengthen the likelihood that early learners will establish habits and mindsets about school that will ensure equitable opportunities. Instruction delivered in a public school setting offers teachers an immediate professional network and data collected informs the school and district continuous improvement plans. Our education system is currently structured to pay the least attention to children’s progress during these critical years. Under current federal law, state and district accountability benchmarks focus primarily on student performance in grades three through eight. Many intervention strategies target these grades as well. With the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), we can seize the

opportunity to better align school improvement plans with what we know about child development and early learning from birth to third grade. The Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) Early Education Policy Brief reads, “If early learning is a key part of elementary school improvement strategies, schools will be more likely to succeed at closing gaps and raising performance early, before students need extensive remediation.”

If we expect positive results, we must be informed and diligent in the delivery of high quality education. In a public school, a licensed early childhood educator is required to provide direct instruction at all times, under the supervision and evaluation of a school principal, with strict teacher quality standards established and adhered to. In *Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning: Executive Summary of Research Findings* (The Wallace Foundation, 2010), the authors state “Our examination of shared leadership turns a spotlight on how principals and teachers change classroom practice in efforts to improve student learning. Together, principals and teachers are uniquely positioned to affect students’ classroom experience.” Why then, are private programs only required to have a licensed teacher “onsite” with no expectation for mentoring, supervision or evaluation? The discrepancy in this standard jeopardizes the quality of service to Vermont’s youngest students. As stated by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, “Creating the right conditions for early childhood development is likely to be more effective and less costly than addressing problems at a later age.” Public schools are held to high standards and have been working to improve the connection to the K-12 system. I urge you to support that progress.

In conclusion, the quality of curriculum and instruction matters greatly to our youngest students. Teacher quality is best measured and supported by trained administrators and through professional learning communities that are connected through a PreK-grade 12 system. Vermont can be a leader in positive learning outcomes for all students by making a commitment to high quality standards using evidence-based practices and by supporting its public schools, which are tasked to ensure just that.

Appendix A: Vermont’s Framework for Early Childhood Comprehensive Assessment



## Appendix B: Sources

Framework for Vermont's Early Childhood Comprehensive Assessment System (April 2016)

Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes: *Access to High Quality Early Care and Education: Readiness and Opportunity Gaps in America (2014)* Milagros Nores, PhD & W. Steven Barnett, PhD (May 2014).

[http://ceelo.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/ceelo\\_policy\\_report\\_access\\_quality\\_ece.pdf](http://ceelo.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/ceelo_policy_report_access_quality_ece.pdf)

Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes: Policy Brief The State of Early Learning in ESSA: Plans and Opportunities for Implementation (December, 2017)

<http://ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2018-02/ESSA%20Early%20Learning%20Policy%20Brief%20FINAL.pdf>

Minervino, J. & Pianta, R. (September, 2014). Early learning: The new factbase and cost sustainability. In J. Minervino(Ed.), *Lessons from research and the classroom*. Washington: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

NAEYC Position Statement: *Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment and Program Evaluation, Building an Effective, Accountable System in Programs for Children Birth through Age 8* (November, 2003).

<https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/pscape.pdf>

The Wallace Foundation: *Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning: Executive Summary of Research Findings (2010)*. Kyla L. Wahlstrom, Karen Seashore Louis, Kenneth Leithwood, Stephen E. Anderson.

<https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/140884/Executive%20Summary%20Report-Web%20%282%29.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>