



Officers

Geo Honigford
President
Royalton

Stuart Wepler
Vice President
Elmore

Kim Gleason
Treasurer
Essex

Celeste Girrell
Member-at-Large
Sutton

Marikate Kelley
Member-at-Large
Monkton

Emily Long
Past-President
Leland & Gray UHS

Staff

Nicole Mace
Executive Director
nmace@vtvsba.org

Harry Frank
Director of Board
Education Services
hfrank@vtvsba.org

Kerri Lamb
Director of Operations
klamb@vtvsba.org

Emily Simmons
Director of Legal &
Policy Services
esimmons@vtvsba.org

To: The House Education Committee
From: Nicole Mace, Executive Director
Date: January 19, 2017
Re: Act 166 Implementation

When the legislature adopted Act 166, ensuring universal access to prekindergarten for Vermont's 3 and 4 year olds, our Association supported the law because we believe strongly in the benefits of high quality early education, especially for our most vulnerable children.

We urge the General Assembly to monitor implementation of the law in order to ensure the program meets the goals of quality, equity, efficiency, transparency and accountability. These are the goals required of all school districts under Act 46.

Quality

With the passage of Act 166, the state expanded the definition of public education to include prekindergarten, which can be provided in a public or private setting. Title 16 now defines "elementary education" as a "program of public school education adapted to the needs of students in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and the first six grades" (16 VSA 11(3)). However, administration of the law is not overseen by the Agency responsible for the public education system. Rather, the system is jointly administered by the Agency of Human Services (AHS) and the Agency of Education (AOE).

Data from the AOE indicate there were 7,300 students enrolled in prekindergarten in the 2015-2016 school year. According to the child care information system available through the Child Development Division at AHS, there are 139 prequalified public programs and 233 prequalified private programs eligible to receive preK vouchers. By way of comparison, in the K-12 system there are 390 public and independent schools serving 80,000 publicly-funded students.

One way of measuring the quality of prekindergarten programs is through the number of STARS it has. Programs must have at least three stars in order to be eligible to receive a prekindergarten voucher. The following table shows the STARS quality rating for each type of provider.

Type of Provider	5 STARS	4 STARS	3 STARS
Private	48%	39%	13%
Public	55%	35%	10%

Within the private provider context, 17% of prekindergarten programs are administered through registered home providers; the remaining 83% are administered through a licensed provider.

Every child must have access to a high quality prekindergarten program within their community. Analysis of where 5 STAR programs are located within the state will be an important step to determine whether that goal is within reach. Identifying opportunities to achieve quality through economies of scale is an additional area to explore.

Equity

Prekindergarten should be a benefit all students can access, regardless of family income or situation. Data on use of prekindergarten vouchers must be collected and analyzed to determine whether this \$32 million investment is being accessed by children and families contending with barriers associated with poverty, addiction, language, disability and geographic isolation.

We share the concerns articulated by VCSEA that students with disabilities do not have access to the same programs available to their non-disabled peers in this model. The cost associated with LEAs providing special education services in multiple locations outside of the supervisory union/district boundary would be prohibitive. A better approach is to allow for the establishment of preK regions that encompass an SU/SD geographic region. To date, five preK regions have been approved, one has been approved with conditions, five have been denied, and one has been withdrawn.

Efficiency

I would like to refer this Committee to one of the findings of Act 46, because I believe it to be relevant to your analysis of the efficiency of the prekindergarten program.

With 13 different types of school district governance structures, elementary and secondary education in Vermont lacks cohesive governance and delivery systems. As a result, many school districts: (1) are not well-suited to achieve economies of scale; and (2) lack the flexibility to manage, share, and transfer resources, including personnel, with other school districts and to provide students with a variety of high-quality educational opportunities.

In a mixed delivery model, with two separate state and federal regulatory systems, and significant variation in the practices of the providers and the entities responsible for administering the program, opportunities for inefficiencies abound. The General Assembly should identify opportunities to build cohesive governance and delivery systems that deliver high quality, affordable prekindergarten education, just as we seek to attain them in K-12 education.

Transparency and Accountability

The joint administration of this law has not worked well to date. The conflict over fingerprint-supported background checks is an illustration of this. In that instance, AOE and AHS worked for over seven months to determine the best methods to both inform school districts and private providers of the record check requirements and ensure they are fulfilled. They were unable to devise an approach that worked, and as a result we had a situation where the school year started, private providers were not cleared, and families, school districts, and providers were placed in an untenable position.

Making modifications to the fingerprint statutes is essential, but doing so will not resolve the apparent disconnect between AHS and AOE in terms of the ability to administer a public policy construct as complex as this one. The General Assembly should consider having one agency ultimately responsible for administration of the program.