

Testimony on PreK Provisions of S.257 draft 18.1

House Human Services Committee

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify. The Vermont Superintendents Association and its members have been outspoken supporters of universal access to PreK education. The Association believes in a mixed delivery system involving high quality public and private providers.

VSA is also heavily committed to equity in learning opportunities for Vermont's children and to efficiency and effectiveness in utilization of taxpayer dollars.

Because VSA supports publicly funded PreK education, equity, efficiency and effectiveness, we support the House Education Committee's proposal to amend certain provisions of Act 166.

In summary, we believe that the House Education Committee's Proposal will achieve four useful purposes.

1. It will streamline and improve the efficiency of the implementation of the Act by making the Agency of Education responsible for oversight of PreK education.

It is well-established that Act 166 has been plagued by a wide array of efficiency challenges at the local, regional and state levels. Charging the Agency of Education with oversight for education and education investments supported by Education Fund dollars makes sense in practical and policy contexts.

2. It will continue to support and promote the local and regional partnerships involving school districts and qualified private providers by preserving the current relationships.

This is important because, while PreK education utilizes a voucher system to implement a portability framework, school districts, families and private providers generally understand and support connections and continuity within the system established to improve access to early education, especially for children from more challenging circumstances.

3. Significantly, the proposal will address resource challenges for school districts, in this era of tight budgets and cost containment by adjusting the weighting of long

term average daily membership by establishing a student weighting factor of .70 for public PreK programs operating for twenty hours each week (as compared to .46 for a ten-hour program). The adjustment to weighting recognizes the program expenses (direct and indirect) associated with an expanded program, supports the establishment of more comprehensive programs, addresses the fact that PreK expansion grant funds are expiring and provides for an enriched option for children for whom, due to circumstances, a program operated by a public school is the best option.

4. Through the creation of a PreK Advisory Committee the General Assembly will establish an out-of-session entity to examine important questions about the funding and delivery of prekindergarten education. The questions outlined in the bill are useful, appropriate and deserve analysis and review by the Legislature.

I have heard concerns that providing a weighting factor of .70 for a twenty-hour program is inequitable and not fair to private providers. I do not agree because ADM and weighting for the public schools and tuition for private providers are long established program features not intended to be equivalent. Tuition payments are features of a voucher model. ADM and weighting reflect Vermont's education funding system.

There is a common misperception that ADM and weighting equate to cash payments to school districts. That is not correct. ADM and weighting are intended to reflect the costs of educating a student with characteristics in a public-school setting, with all the associated costs. In addition, weighting is a factor in a distribution formula. That means that, in a system with, for example, 80 thousand students, if the total weighted long-term membership is 88 thousand students, a factor of 90.9 percent is applied to take the number back down to 80 thousand equalized pupils. A school districts equalized pupils then become the denominator in a calculation where education spending is divided by equalized pupils yield education spending, from which tax rates are calculated.

Especially in an era where school district costs are under such intense scrutiny it is appropriate to respond to the prospects for a twenty-hour program by increasing the weighting factor.

In summary, the PreK provisions included within S.257 draft 18.1, which received unanimous approval by the House Education Committee, constitute good public policy in support of a better implementation framework for Act 166, greater efficiency and effectiveness, and most importantly, stronger support for Vermont's families and PreK aged children.