

Vermont Universal PreK – Suggestions for the next iteration of the system

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Vermont’s universal, publicly-funded pre-K program (UPK) plays a critical role in ensuring that all of Vermont’s children have access to high-quality early care and learning programs so as to assure child health and safety, and enhance child outcomes around social and emotional development, physical and mental health, and nutrition for young children – all prerequisites for school-readiness and lifelong success.

1. Don’t pass legislation during the current session to change the system. There are significant differences of opinion on making changes to VT’s UPK system. Suggestions around a number of these elements are set forth below, though more time for study is merited. Additionally, the Building Bright Futures “Think Tank” has just begun its work to envision a more optimized, early care and learning system for Vermont. This work can be used to build consensus around system changes for Vermont’s UPK system, and to inform legislation to achieve these goals.

2. Keep universality.	Pre-K should be universal, just like k-12, with no income or means-testing.
3. Keep portability.	Portability – the notion that the UPK benefit follows the child, and is not restricted to programs within the child’s SD/SU – ensures that families are able to select a UPK program that works best in terms of meeting the needs of the child and family.
4. Keep mixed delivery.	Mixed delivery means that programs are offered through regulated centers, school-operated programs, and family home providers, thus providing families with options to best meet the needs of the child and family.
5. Don’t bifurcate the system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep joint oversight (AHS/AOE) of VT’s UPK system, one universal set of Licensing regulations, and one monitoring/improvement system for all providers, public and private. • The U.S. Administration for Children and Families publishes <i>Caring for Our Children Basics: Health and Safety Foundations for Early Care and Education</i>. <i>Caring for our Children Basics</i> represents the minimum health and safety standards experts believe should be in place where children are cared for outside of their homes. It is the result of work from both federal and non-federal experts and is founded on <i>Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards; Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs, Third Edition</i> created by the American Academy of Pediatrics; American Public Health Association; and National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education. These guidelines inform Vermont’s regulations for licensed or registered early care and learning programs, including both public and private preK programs, and provide strong assurances around the health and safety of all of VT’s young children served through UPK programs • Provide strategic, targeted exemptions from Licensing regulations for public providers where such exemptions make sense (e.g., some administrative issues). • Make the existing regulatory system more robust – reduce Licensor-to-provider ratio, increase frequency of monitoring, increase transparency of data, enhance T/TA system for continuous improvement.
6. Implement centralized admin/fiscal process with AOE.	Streamlining and centralizing administrative and fiscal processes with AOE will provide for greater consistency and efficiency in use of public funds, and drastically reduce burdens for SU/SDs and private providers. Ostensibly, this would entail standardized forms, time lines and processes.
7. Requirements and guidelines around collaboration	Implementation of Act 166 has given rise to increased competition, particularly between public and private providers, for children and staff. Given Vermont’s early care and learning workforce challenges, providing requirements and guidelines around collaboration among public and private providers would provide for a more efficient system, particularly in blending federal, state and private funding so as to optimize programs for children and families, provide for shared services, and support better workforce development.