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VCSEA strongly believes that publicly funded Universal Pre Kindergarten (pre-K) in Vermont should be a benefit that all students can access, regardless of family income or situation. Many of the current Act 166 implementation challenges are about equity and the state must ensure that **all children** benefit from this public investment and are getting the services they need and are entitled to.

Currently under Act 166, **students with disabilities do not have access to the same programs available to their non-disabled peers** because LEA's are only required to provide early childhood special education services (Early Essential Education - EEE) for resident children found eligible for special education and related services within the school district boundaries. However, parents can access the Act 166/pre-K tuition voucher outside of the district boundaries. Assuring that children receive the services they need as early as possible should be a top priority in a publicly funded pre-K system. Also this session, the General Assembly has focused on reducing special education costs within the pre-K-12 education system and research that confirms that building social, emotional, behavioral and literacy skills in young children is critical and can offset higher special education costs later in a child's life. In addition, reaching the most vulnerable children at this young age is also very relevant to this committee's important work on toxic stress.

To address these issues and more, **VCSEA supports the House Education Committee version of S.257.** The language in the bill as proposed by the Senate:

- Is silent on special education delivery;
- Diminishes existing public/private program partnerships, moves away from collaboration (doesn't allow for high quality partnerships) and takes away pre-K regions and any reference to geographic boundaries;

- Uses public dollars to support private education with no oversight ability to ensure non-discriminatory practices (e.g., 504, special education) - at least currently now contracts with private providers offers some recourse;
- Negatively impacts ADM.

This makes Act 166 largely a statewide voucher system only, when there is the opportunity to do so much more by making sure all kids receive the prevention and early intervention services they need to succeed in school.

Key points of the **House Education Committee version** that VCSEA supports:

- Shifts **oversight solely to AOE**, but **maintains daily administration (enrollment, billing, regions, agreements) of pre-K at the SU/SD level**. This allows for robust public-private partnerships at the local level.
- Establishes that **AOE would have quality and safety regulatory oversight over public pre-K programs** (once the State Board of Education drafts health and safety rules for public pre-K providers), and AHS continues oversight for private pre-K providers.
- Retains **pre-K regions** which makes services more equitable for children in need of special education services.
- Allows for **5 year-olds to access pre-K tuition when there is an IEP or 504** when the education team determines that pre-K is the best placement.
- **Establishes a pre-K advisory committee** that address **equity issues and other challenges related to Act 166 implementation**. Given the **inability to ensure an appropriate level of access to special education** in the context of the Act 166 pre-K system, it is critical that this work happens. Another issue that needs to be addressed formally by this proposed committee is **evidence that public schools are becoming “special education preschool sites” with the ability of private programs to both deny and expel children**, while this is not the case in public pre-K programs. At the same time, the literature, most recently a study out of Dartmouth, found that pre-K is mostly likely to help low-income children if their classmates come from a range of family incomes. EEE (special education services in Vermont) has always relied on a mixed group of those receiving services and peers from the community. There will be Vermont pre-K expulsion data soon, but we know its high nationally and those disproportionately affected are children of color and children with disabilities. This all must be formally looked into further to ensure an equitable system and the **proposed pre-K advisory committee in the House Education version of this bill could and must do this kind of work**.

We also need more data on who exactly is accessing the public Act 166 voucher, plus the most recent **Act 166 evaluation report** released last week shows Champlain Valley makes up 44% of publicly funded pre-K enrollment in the state (Table 2) and there is under-representation of students who would qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch and under-representation of children with special needs (Table 4 and Table 9). Plus if you look at the map in the report, there are several areas with few or no programs. **This must all be looked at formally by this proposed advisory committee.**

- **Includes ADM provisions that address sustained and extended day pre-K programming** given the need many families have for additional hours and the loss of Vermont's Federal PreK Expansion Grant in FY20 that will mean scaling back programs or increasing local budgets. Full day programs in schools have shown success. For example, St. Albans City has the largest full day pre-K expansion program in the state, and **benefited from a pre-K expansion grant and now needs sustainable funding to keep the program going.** Their data, both qualitative and quantitative, shows the positive impact of full day programming for students at 200% of poverty. They increased their child count significantly with this population and in a recent survey, 89.5% of their families attending the full day program said that they would not be able to access pre-K programming through another site due to lack of transportation, lack of available prequalified sites, and/or lack of need for full day full year programming. They had one child enrolled in a part day program that attended 9% of the time and once a full day slot opened, his attendance jumped to 100%. They are welcoming students into their buildings and making them part of the school community earlier, which provides them with meals and wrap around services at a younger age. They are identifying more students for special education at a younger age and providing them with intervention earlier. Transition to kindergarten is smooth as students already know the building, the teachers, the support staff, unified arts teachers, nurses, etc.

In addition, again in the most recent Act 166 evaluation report from last week, the cost breakdowns (Table 7) highlights the importance of ADM for schools given other associated costs that public schools pay for (student support services, etc.).

To move forward towards a system of universal access that supports a mixed delivery system and maximizes the preschool experience for ALL children, **VCSEA asks that you give the House Education Committee verison your full support.**

