

February 21, 2018

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Written Testimony on Quality Childcare, Childcare Access and State Oversight for Public Pre-K Programs

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Mary Ellen Otis. I am the Co-Executive Director of the Orange County Parent Child Center. The Orange County Parent Child Center is one of fifteen Parent Child Centers in the Parent Child Center Network, serving families with young children throughout Vermont. Our mission is to offer education and support to families, helping them build on their strengths to achieve their goals for health, well-being, and self-sufficiency.

The Orange County Parent Child Center has an on-site licensed early care and education program serving children 6 weeks through 5 years in Tunbridge. Center-wide there are 58 children enrolled from 51 families. We are a four STAR, pre-qualified public pre-K program currently partnering with 6 towns to provide a public pre-kindergarten program to 32 children. Only 5 of these children attend for the 10 public pre-k hours only. 33% of our families receive assistance through the Child Care Financial Assistance Program.

What Works

The majority of our families are working families who often commute to Montpelier, Barre, or the Upper Valley to work. Because we offer full day, full year programs, these families can access the 10 hours of public pre-k and receive consistent quality care beyond those hours. Children are not missing the opportunity for the public pre-k experience or trying to manage transitions from public pre-k to other care. Children on IEPs receiving specialized instruction or therapy are able to receive it, on site, without impacting their public pre-k hours.

OCPCC works very closely and successfully with our partner schools. Our teachers collaborate to insure a smooth and successful transition into Kindergarten for each child and his or her family. These teachers are Early Childhood educators, well trained in the development of preschool children. Our curriculum, facility, and equipment are specifically designed for the children we serve.

Families must often make decisions about childcare based on financial realities. Public pre-K has allowed many families to afford access to quality care. Child Care Financial Assistance subsidy alone is inadequate to cover the cost of care. Many of our families are able to access our program with support from multiple sources including public pre-k dollars, child care subsidy, expanded pre-k funded through

the Professional Development Expansion grant, and the limited scholarship support we are able to provide.

Families who otherwise might not come through our door, are able to access other services specifically provided by Parent Child Centers. This “one stop shop” supports family well-being and is vital to the continued school success for these children.

Challenges and Concerns

Preschool children are not little kindergarteners. The licensing regulations for licensed early care and education programs recognize the differences in needs and abilities. The recent revision of these regulations strengthened and amplified the requirements programs must achieve to provide quality care to this population. A key change was the increase in qualifications for teaching staff. There is a significant shortage of licensed pre-k teachers throughout Vermont and public schools have the advantage over private providers in the competition for attracting and retaining qualified staff.

Our public schools are funded through tax dollars. While community support is never a given, maintenance of the facility and keeping the lights on in the public schools is not the same day to day worry faced by private providers. Our communities depend on both entities. The increasing competition between public schools and private providers for public pre-k dollars could have consequences beyond programming for three and four year olds. Infant and Toddler care is in short supply across the state. Licensing requirements for providing this care limit numbers of children in a group and limit the numbers of children in the teacher’s care. Rightly so! The responsibility is great and the quality of the care given should be of the highest standard. The Infant and Toddler programs at the Orange County Parent Child Center lose money. This is not a new phenomenon. It is the norm for most private programs. This loss is offset by three and four year olds who are developmentally ready for larger group sizes and a greater child to teacher ratio. Ours is a complex system with each program and service interdependent on the others.

The current administration of public pre-k is heavily public school driven. This school centric approach is confusing, frustrating, and creates an unnecessary burden on private providers and families. Successful co-implementation by AOE and AHS has been hampered by duplicative enrollment procedures, fingerprinting requirements, and a payment system that requires the public schools to play the role of intermediary. Ultimately, an unintended consequence could be the loss of participating

private programs. All of this would result in fewer choices for families and a reduction in the number of children able to access this important opportunity.

Wishes

I have been in the field of Early Education for almost 40 years as a home care provider, a substitute, assistant teacher, teacher and Executive Director in both Orange and Windsor counties. As they say in the State Farm insurance commercial – I have seen a few things.

I would encourage you to trust the expertise of AHS and AOE to do their own work and support them in finding efficient ways to collaborate on behalf of Vermont's families. Shared leadership supports quality and accountability while insuring families have choice and children learn and grow in the most developmentally appropriate environments.

I would also ask that you continue to explore ways to address the statewide shortage of Early Childhood teachers and the impact of significant wage disparity between public and private providers. We need more quality programs, yet struggle mightily to maintain existing programs because of this shortage.