



Building Bright Futures

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To: House Education Committee

From: Sarah Squirrell, Executive Director, Building Bright Futures

Testimony on Publicly-Funded Pre-Kindergarten

Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you this morning about your committee's proposed bill addressing Vermont's publicly-funded pre-K system. My name is Sarah Squirrell, and I am the Executive Director of Building Bright Futures, Vermont's public-private partnership charged under Act 104 with serving as the advisor to the Governor, Administration, and Legislature on issues related to young children, ages birth – 8, and their families.

Building Bright Futures is committed to ensuring that all age-eligible children have access to universal, publicly-funded pre-K programs. While we appreciate this committee's focus on the pre-K system, this is the first year of full implementation of Act 166, and we are still learning about how our universal pre-K system is working across the state. Earlier this month we released our annual report on the state of young children and their families in Vermont, entitled *How Are Vermont's Young Children and Families?* The latest edition of the report included information on pre-K in our state, and shared that participation in early implementation was strong, with approximately 7,300 children participating in publicly-funded pre-K programs during the 2015-2016 school year. This strong participation is estimated to have increased during our current academic year, the first year of full implementation, and we are looking forward to reviewing enrollment data to better understand how to continue to strengthen the program moving forward.

Additionally, we need to meet the needs of all children. While the committee's proposed language discussing pre-K regions provides some additional clarity for school districts, we would benefit from learning more about how families are currently using the program during full implementation before formalizing new language related to this portion of Act 166. A current advantage of the program is that some families who commute are able to access services outside of their local school district at locations closer to where they work, either because of preference or because of limited access. While we have heard stories citing both reasons, we need to better understand parent use and parent choice, in order to ensure that we, as a state, are able to offer a variety of high-quality learning environments is more conducive to meeting the diverse and individual needs of children during the most critical time of development.

Better understanding how Act 166 is utilized and opportunities to strengthen and better support our pre-K system is a tangible next step that is linked to work Building Bright Futures will begin this year, as part of implementing recommendations from the Blue Ribbon Commission on Financing High Quality, Affordable Child Care. In my role with BBF, I recently had the pleasure of serving on the Commission. I understand that you've already heard, generally, about the work of the commission from our chair, Charlotte Ancel, and I wanted to discuss, in more detail, the connections between the work of the Commission and this committee's consideration of publicly-funded pre-K.

During our time together, the commission discussed many issues related to Vermont's early care and learning system, serving young children birth to five, including universal pre-K. Our group had

many conversations about how the issues of equity, quality, affordability, and scale impacted not only publicly-funded pre-K programs, but also the system as a whole.

Related to this, as Charlotte already shared with you, the commission developed short-term and long-term recommendations for Vermont's early care and learning system in order to move the work initiative by the commission forward. One key piece of these recommendations is undertaking a design process, beginning this year, to design and implement a comprehensive, equitable, high-quality, and affordable early care and learning system. As laid out by the Commission, this work would include a comprehensive review of Vermont's publicly-funded pre-K system. The Commission charged Building Bright Futures with leading this work, and it is our intention to begin this process in the next several months. This work will be comprehensive and engage early childhood stakeholders, members of the Administration and Legislature, families, and community members in order to better understand family and community needs, opportunities to maximize system efficiencies, and opportunities to strengthen and support collaboration across state agencies and community partnerships.

Through Act 104, we have the authority and duty to convene members of the early care and learning community, medical community, education community, and other organizations, as well as state agencies serving young children, to ensure that families receive quality services in the most efficient and cost-effective manner. Given this charge, I believe it is important for your committee to understand this work, as I think it ties directly to considering how to better support families in accessing equitable, high-quality pre-K in our state, and I would encourage your committee to become partners in the process, as laid out by the Commission rather than tackling this issue in a manner that stands alone from the rest of Vermont's early care and learning system.

I would advise this committee to waiting until we have more information about full implementation and have the opportunity to discussion opportunities to strengthen Vermont's pre-K system within the broader context of investigating, designing, and implementing an even stronger early care and learning system. I look forward to continuing to work with you to support our state's young children and families, and I hope that you will take advantage of this unique opportunity to participate in the broader discussion of how to build an equitable, high-quality, and affordable early care and learning system, inclusive of publicly-funded pre-K, for children birth to five in our state.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.