

To: Vermont House Education Committee

From: Robert S. Bliss

Date: February 27, 2018

Re: Proposed Changes to Act 166, Vermont's "Universal Pre K"

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I have been invited to provide testimony to Vermont's House Education Committee in the topic of the proposed changes to Vermont's Act 166, "Universal Pre K." The draft document I was presented with is dated, "1/19/2018 – JDM – 01:38 PM." Thus, my comments are specific to that document. I am unaware of any changes made since it was issued.

The stated goals of the changes, in my words, are as follows: 1) To allow Pre K providers to serve one agency in terms of regulation, rather than two; 2) To minimize the effort needed on the part of Pre K providers to receive revenue for offering Pre K; 3) Simplify and clarify what "quality" means for Pre K Providers. I will organize my comments as they relate to these three goals in terms of opportunities and challenges.

#### One Agency for Pre K Regulation:

Opportunities: Overall, allowing schools and private providers to respond solely to the Agency of Education for regulation of Pre K is an opportunity for growth. The AOE can and should regulate matters dealing with education of Vermont's greatest resource, the children. This effort makes the business of early education easier on all providers, for Pre K only.

Challenges: Private and public providers will still need to respond to child care regulations, federal Head Start regulations, and the Agency of Human Services for all other aspects of their business. The resulting burden of effort will not be substantially less, especially in the private sector.

#### Minimize Efforts to Receive Revenue for Providers:

Opportunities: The expansion of Pre K in Vermont was always promoted in the field as a matter of economics. At no public hearing that I attended did I hear educators, providers, or legislators discuss this issue in terms of providing the highest quality education to our Pre K students. Rather, the discussion was always about 1) providing child care providers with more revenue, 2) decreasing the cost bourn by parents who pay for Pre K and child care, 3) returning parents to work sooner and with less of a work burden. Action taken to make the Secretary of Education responsible for monitoring of the distribution of Pre K tuition is keeping with the economic focus of this work. More on this in the "quality" section.

Challenges: The challenges here may be too many to articulate. Here are the big ones:

1. The Secretary of Education, and the Agency of Education, will become responsible for hundreds of business interactions, with as many more vendors. I have yet to meet the state agency that has its goal to increase the burden on business and finance, and the

number of accounts. In fact, the work is frequently delayed by months, even over a year, to complete.

2. The accurate accounting of which students are enrolled in which Pre K is the biggest challenge in the field. That relates directly to paid tuition. The only providers we have had consistently accurate invoices from are those that serve three or fewer students from RCPS. All others have errors on each submission. We carefully monitor attendance, enrollment, and the allocation of funds for each student. This is not because the providers lack ethics. It is because providers are not accustomed to accurate accounting of those things, which is compounded by student/family mobility and “discharged” students.
3. Loss of ADM at the public school level drives up the per pupil cost calculation at the local level and therefore the tax rate.
4. This would be the first step toward a single, statewide, system of providing education. An adjustment of that type requires a significant restructuring of the function and capacity of the Agency of Education. Secretary Holcomb provided testimony that the Agency of Education could be prepared to take over this function by June 2019. That’s a rapid turnaround. The people at the Agency are wonderful and caring people. However, it is understood in the field that they are taxed beyond their capacity on a daily basis.
5. By making the Agency of Education the single interaction point, we would establish as many new schools for the agency to deal with. This is moves away from consolidation efforts. Even given a step toward a statewide system, the additional interactions seem counter to streamlining.
6. “Regional adjustments” for statewide tuition rate promotes an ever widening gap in terms of quality and opportunity.

### Simplify “Quality”:

Opportunities: On the surface, Pre K providers may see this as a real relief. Private providers will only need to have a licensed and qualified teacher “present” during instruction. NAEYC accreditation, or at least four stars, remains a positive foundation for a basic level of quality.

### Challenges:

1. One of the real “winning” points of the current system is the close relationship districts have cultivated with the local Pre K providers. As an example, in Rutland we established the simple goals of establishing positive partnerships, learn, support the highest quality trauma informed instruction. We are present with each partner in Rutland City on a weekly basis and offer no cost professional development to our partners. This year’s included: early language acquisition, Strengthening Families, early literacy, establishing positive community in class, and understanding childhood trauma. If we no longer oversee our partners, and have no ADM to count, we will be unable to offer the timely and specific support we do now.
2. Having a licensed and qualified teacher “present” is a step backward. Yes, finding and employing these teachers is a challenge. If we want to make a difference, economically

and in terms of quality, require that the licensed and qualified teacher provided the instruction.

3. We have early and open relationships with the parents who register their students. Losing that connection will hurt.
4. If the Agency of Education's method for monitoring quality relies specifically on outcomes of readiness, as measured by the annual teacher survey, and standards based assessments (TSG), the outcome is predetermined and easily predicted. Success will follow economics, positive home life, and instruction by master level teachers. Will the Head Start programs around the state be labeled "failing?" We desperately need programs that support young families struggling with life's challenges.

#### General Observations:

1. High quality Pre K for all students does not come cheap or easy. It requires an "all in approach." If Vermont really wants the long term educational and economic benefits of high quality Pre K, it requires a model based on research that large cities, and other states, have established is effective.
2. See omission on page 2, line 9, "Pre"

#### Research on High Quality Pre K:

"Pre-K: Decades worth of Studies, One Strong Message." Sanchez, Claudio, NPR, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/05/03/524907739/pre-k-decades-worth-of-studies-one-strong-message>

"What is High Quality Pre-K?" Pew Charitable Trust, 2005.

<http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2005/06/13/what-is-highquality-prek>

"Talking the Talk on High Quality Pre-K." National Institute for Early Education Research, 2017. <http://nieer.org/2017/11/15/talking-talk-quality-pre-k>

Kirp, David L. *Kids First: Five Big Ideas for Transforming Kids Lives* (2011)

Kirp, David L. *The Sandbox Investment: The Preschool Movement and Kids First Politics* (2007)

"Effects of a State Prekindergarten Program on Children's Achievement and Behavior through Third Grade." Lipsey and Farran 2016.

[https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/research/pri/TNVPK\\_Grade\\_3\\_working\\_paper.pdf](https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/research/pri/TNVPK_Grade_3_working_paper.pdf)

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