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House Human Services Written Testimony on Proposed Changes to Act 166

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Claire Kendall, Co Executive Director at the Family Center of Washington County. The Family Center is a member of the Parent Child Center Network. Parent Child Centers are a network of 15 community-based non-profit organizations, serving all of Vermont. The focus of each PCC is to provide support and education to families with young children. The goal is to help all Vermont families get off to a healthy start, promote well-being, and build on family strengths.

The Family Center of Washington County has an on-site licensed early care and education program that serves children 6 weeks -5years, 68 children per day. We are a 5 STAR, prequalified public prek program, and have participated in accessing what was previously ADM dollars on prek children for approx.. 10 years now. I have a Master's degree in Education, and a Vermont teaching license in Early Education.

It is our hope that as the legislature looks at proposed changes, you continue to hold up what is best for children and families across Vermont. One original key component of legislating public prek was to create a mechanism for qualified private licensed programs to access public funding for preschoolers, providing parents more choice in choosing the program and setting that is best for them. There are many in the field, including Parent Child Centers, who feel strongly that to it is too soon for any legislative changes to Act 166, rather it is extremely important at this time to allow the current bill more time for implementation and continued statewide roll out, including ongoing system streamlining and efficiency efforts that are currently underway. The nationwide trend where there are both quality rating systems and publicly funded early education is to have integrated systems that pulls early education programs together, private and public, and many states have a co-administration system in state government. It makes sense that Vermont would be part of this nationwide trend, as we are a

progressive state, that is both child and family friendly. Much of the language that has been proposed so far by both the House and Senate Education Committees' leads a path towards a bifurcated system, on an issue that is already increasingly creating divisions within the early care and education field. **We are here today to urge your committee to not push through new prek legislation at this time, but to work with the Building Bright Futures Think Tank, a multidisciplinary group with statewide representation, that can spend time over the next year building a framework for changes to Act 166 that are right for Vermont, and bring this back to the legislature.**

Although co-administration is challenging, AHS/CDD has historical purview and technical experience for quality and safety licensing oversight of children birth through 5, and a BFIS billing, payment, and quality credentialing system in place. There is a great deal of concern in the community that there will be a lack of parity between public and private preschool programs, and different standards, if there were changes to co-administration. This would create two different tracks, as opposed to having a united system of care for young children with a variety of choices and options for parents to choose from. It makes sense that AHS/CDD be part of the Prek system and for public and private Prek programs be licensed and accountable to child care licensing safety standards. Co-administration by AHS and AOE is critical to the success and parity of an integrated, mixed delivery early development system. Additionally, there is a lack of infrastructure and experience in the AOE for sole responsibility of Act 166 in terms of a system for statewide oversight for payments, program & staff capacity, etc.

An original intention of Act 166 was for this bill to meet the needs of children and families by offering increased access to quality prek education across the state. If ADM was increased for public schools and additional publicly-funded hours aren't available for children enrolled at private providers, many are concerned this would put private child care providers out of business, and parent choice becomes increasingly limited in their young child's education choices, especially for full day/full year child care. Both private and public programs provide quality learning experiences for children. Community based early development programs often have environments ie: buildings, playgrounds, classrooms, that are specifically designed for the developmental and safety needs of young children. Parents being able to choose what setting is best for their child is important. In communities where public schools elect to expand their ADM to full days, the impact on the private providers will be profound. The likely decline in the number of preschool children being served in private programs will force some private programs to close. There is already a shortage of quality child care in the state of Vermont, we cannot afford to lose

**Comment [SK1]:** Note the House Ed bill doesn't give full ADM – just .7 if they do more than 20 hours

any more programs, nor is it a positive dynamic for the early childhood field to have public and private programs in competition with each other, as opposed to collaborating and partnering.

Again, at the inception of this statute, a core philosophy was to increase equitable, statewide access to child and family friendly ~~access to~~ prek, and that includes choices between a private community based program or a school based program. *Vermont working families need private programs that offer full day/full year child care.* There is a licensed prek teacher shortages across the state, and it is increasingly difficult for private programs to retain licensed teachers, as public schools have on average better salaries and benefits. This creates a tension within the field between private programs and public schools in terms of hiring teachers. It is very concerning to see an increasing number of qualified private child care programs struggle to retain licensed prek teachers, without which programs are not able to receive prek funds, which leaves working parents with less choices or access to those public tuition dollars. I do not believe this was the original intent or spirit of the law.

There have been many countless positive experiences our program has had from partnering with the several public schools we have agreements with. We have been able to have more joint/team meetings, increased collaboration, shared professional development opportunities, more coordination around Kindergarten transitions, better early detection and referrals to special education, more seamless supports for children and families eligible for Special Education services, including special educators coming on site and delivering services to children while they are attending our program. Teaming and partnering within one unified early care and education system is a win-win model for children & families in Vermont.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify before your committee today.

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Co Executive Director

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