



Building Bright Futures

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House Education Testimony S257

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Thank you very much for inviting me to speak with you today regarding prekindergarten education. My name is Sarah Squirrell and I am the Executive Director for Building Bright Futures (BBF). Building Bright Futures is Vermont's statewide public/private partnership and designated early childhood advisory council charged under Act 104 with serving as the advisor to the governor and legislature on issues related to the early care, health and education system. Building Bright Futures is committed to ensuring access for Vermont's children to high quality early care and education opportunities as well as supporting the state in developing a strong, effective and coordinated early care and education system.

The access and provision of prekindergarten education must be considered within the context of the overall early care and education system. The complexity of our early care and education system requires us have bi-focal vision. We must attend to the immediate needs of children as families as well as taking a long range strategic and systemic view. It is critical that we consider how issues of equity, quality, affordability and scale impact not only access to prekindergarten, but consider the 0-5 early care and education system as whole.

BBF Act 166 Stakeholder Outreach Report

In 2017, the Vermont Legislature heard testimony from many parties about challenges and opportunities for improvement in the implementation of Act 166, Vermont's Universal Prekindergarten law. As a result, the legislature tasked the Secretaries of Education and Human Services to make recommendations that would "ensure equity, quality, and affordability, and reduce duplication and complexity in the current delivery of prekindergarten services" (Sec. 37 of Act 49 of 2017). In November 2017, the agencies released a report with eight recommendations for changes to the law.

In January 2018, AOE and AHS presented the legislature with proposed legislation that would enact those recommendations. AOE and AHS recognize that it is important that those most impacted by Act 166 have an opportunity to weigh in on any changes. They proposed that Building Bright Futures, in its role as early childhood advisor to the administration and legislature, use its state and regional council infrastructure to gather feedback on the Act 166 recommendations and proposed legislative changes in order to present this report to the legislature in early March 2018.

BBF completed a public input process and presented a final report in March 2018 (submitted as a separate document). An overview of key themes will be provided to today, please refer to the full report for additional consideration. This report is intended to provide an objective overview and synthesis of the feedback BBF gathered statewide in order to inform respective legislative committees reviewing the newly proposed Pre-K language and changes to Act 166.

Building Vermont's Future Think Tank

BBF is currently leading a statewide effort that includes the establishment of the Building Vermont's Future Think Tank to explore and develop recommendations for a comprehensive 0-5 early care and education system. The objective, process and work of the Think Tank should be considered as part of the House Human Services Committee's recommendations.

BBF was charged by the Blue Ribbon Commission on Financing High Quality, Affordable Child Care to engage diverse stakeholders in a statewide effort to explore and develop recommendations for a comprehensive integrated 0-5 early care and education system. The Think Tank is comprised of early childhood policy, finance and systems leaders whose objective it is to develop an actionable blueprint for the future of Vermont's 0-5 early care and education system. This will include identification of what is required to move the recommendations forward in terms of policy, legislative and administrative action and a timeline and tiered implementation plan and strategy. The Think Tank will deliver proposed recommendations to the state legislature no later than January 2019. The Early Care and Education system components that the Think Tank will address include:

A) Developing and implementing financing mechanisms

Description: Identify how to pay for Vermont's future early care and learning system, building off of the Blue Ribbon Commission's analysis of the current system's financial inputs and potential funding mechanisms, as well as best practices and financing innovations from others. Acknowledging the tension between the need to support Vermont's children and families and the broader economic and budgetary realities of the state, focus on achieving affordability for families and for the state.

B) Maximizing resources within the early care and learning delivery system

Description: Develop a future system of integrated early care and learning that maximizes existing resources and provides high quality efficiently and effectively. Consider opportunities to identify efficiencies within the current early care and learning system and achieving economies of scale. Consider state- and district-level costs associated with administration, monitoring, distribution of resources and staffing. Identify how best to leverage existing resources such as PreK-12 infrastructure, community buildings, etc. in order to expand capacity and strengthen and support alignment with the PreK-12 system.

C) Assuring that all children have access to high quality early care and learning programs

Description: As per the Blue Ribbon Commission's quality recommendations, identify the infrastructure and resources that are needed to develop, maintain, and support high-quality early care and learning programs for every child and family in Vermont. Consider BRC's short-term and long-term recommendations to better support Vermont's early care and learning workforce. Consider the many services currently integrated into early care and learning programs and opportunities to strengthen the integration/coordination of comprehensive services.

Think Tank Members

Aly Richards, *The Permanent Fund for Vermont's Children*

Amy Fowler, *VT Agency of Education*

Becca Balint, *Senate Majority Leader*

Becky Millard, *Community College of Vermont*

Betsy Rathbun-Gunn, *United Counseling Services*

Breana Holmes, *VT Department of Health*

Claire Kendall, *Family Center of Washington County*

Dana Robson, *VT Department of Mental Health*

David Young, *South Burlington School District*

Deb Brighton, *Fiscal Analyst*

Diane Nichols Fleming, *North Country Supervisory*

Ginger Farineau, *Hunger Free Vermont*

Jeff Francis, *VT Superintendents Association*

Laurel Bongiorno, *Champlain College*

Linda January, *Otter Creek Child Care Center*

Naomi Alfini, *Parent Representative*

Pam McCarthy, *VT Family Network*

Nicole Mace, *Vermont School Boards Association*

Paul Behrman, *Champlain Head Start*

Rebecca Schrader, *VT Community Loan Fund*

Reeva Murphy, *VT Dept. for Children & Families*

Sarah Buxton, *VT Department of Labor*

Sarah Squirrell, *Building Bright Futures*

Sonja Raymond, *VAEYC, Apple Tree Learning Centers*

Ellen Drolette, *Sunshine Day Care*

The Think Tank will meet four times between April and October 2018, and will deliver its report and recommendations to the state legislature no later than January 2019. Building Bright Futures would recommend that the House Human Services Committee utilize the existing structure of the Building Vermont's Future Think Tank to explore and develop recommendations for a comprehensive 0-5 early care and education system.

Additional Resources for Consideration

Child Care Demand Study

As Vermont looks to build capacity that provides quality, meets the needs of children and families, and is efficient and cost effective then we need to understand the demand for childcare more comprehensively in Vermont. BBF will be leading, in partnership with the Child Development Division and the Permanent Fund a statewide Child Care Demand Study to further refine our understanding of families' needs and preferences for childcare. BBF has engaged with NORC at the University of Chicago as research partner. They are an objective non-partisan research institution that delivers reliable data and a rigorous analysis to guide critical programmatic, business and policy decisions. NORC led the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) in 2012. The Vermont Child Care Demand study will be directed by Dr. Rupa Datta, Vice President and Senior Fellow at NORC. Dr. Datta served as the project director for the National Survey of Early Care and Education.

Pre-K Supply & Demand Study

Based on BBF's responsibility under Act 166, BBF will conduct an evaluation to assess the supply and demand of prequalified pre-kindergarten education programs in Vermont. Specifically, BBF will attempt to answer the question: "Does the supply of slots in prequalified pre-kindergarten programs meet their demand in each of Vermont's regions?" BBF, in conjunction with Vermont Insights (a program of BBF), will conduct a survey-based assessment of all prequalified pre-kindergarten education programs in Vermont. The survey will obtain point-in-time data not collected by the Bright Futures Information System or other sources.

Conclusion

Ensuring that Vermont children have access to high quality early care and education is a priority for our state, and is evidenced by our state's commitment to Universal Pre-K. Implementation challenges are to be expected, as well as the unavoidable challenges that go hand-in-hand with transformative change. As we aspire towards a seamless continuum of early care and learning we recognize that Pre-K sits at the hinge of our public and private programming in Vermont, and it will take time, patience, trust, and iterative change to achieve the best system for children in Vermont. It is important that we continue working together toward the common goal of universal, high quality Pre-K for all Vermont children and families. We recognize and honor the strengths of both the Agency of Education and the Agency of Human Services, and encourage and support their continued collaboration. At its best Act 166 should encourage exceptional partnerships; in which we all contribute and share responsibility. After all, our collective work to create real and lasting change for Vermont's children and families is arguably the most important work we can do today for a better future.

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