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TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO: The Senate Education Committee

FROM: Rebecca Holcombe, Ed.D., Secretary of Education; Brad James, School Finance

SUBJECT: Request for approval by the General Assembly of a second census count in place of the
statutorily mandated October count (S.1)

DATE: January 13, 2017

Problem:

16 V.S.A. § 255 requires superintendents and their contractors to complete fingerprint-supported background checks for any PK-12 employee who might have unsupervised contact with children. This includes all employees in private providers which participate in Act 166 PK. CDD began fingerprint-supported checks on September 1, 2016. Most private providers were not able to complete the process in time and begin PK in time for the statutorily mandated census count in October 2016. Thus, the official count did not accurately capture the number of children expected to be enrolled in PK. An artificially low count would result in lower equalized pupil count for the purposes of setting a tax rate. As a consequence, a low count would lead to an artificially high tax rate. In small districts, this could be unfairly injurious to schools and tax payers.

Proposed solution:

With the permission of the Administration, the AOE initiated a second data collection (SDC) to collect data for those PK students attending a prequalified program at a provider who had not fulfilled all appropriate background checks as of the end of the 20-day census period this fall. This ensures an accurate count, inclusive of PK students, for the purpose of setting the tax rate. We have not finished verification and validation of the second count, but estimate a discrepancy of about 760 PK ADM between the first and second counts. While this seems like a small number, this “missing” ADM in the first count is not evenly distributed across the state and could have a profound impact, particularly on small districts. However, in order to use this second census count for the purpose of setting the tax rate, the AOE needs the legislature to approve the second count – for this year only – in place of the statutorily defined October 2016 count.

Note: the secondary data collection will repeat the collection and verification process of the statutorily mandated count, but at a later date. The same verification, cleaning and validation processes will be applied, to ensure data is accurate.

Timeline of the secondary data collection:

- The SDC was initiated on November 14, 2016.
- Business managers responded by November 18, 2016.
- Data was cleaned by AOE in December 2016.
- A confirmation collection will go out on Monday, January 16, 2017.
- The confirmation collection is due back to the AOE on January 20, 2017.
- Once the data have been checked for duplicates and accuracy, AOE will calculate final equalized pupil counts for FY2018.