

**Legislative Testimony Regarding Proposed Changes to
Act 166, Pre-K Education Law, February 14, 2018
Christopher Kibbe, Superintendent, Windham Northeast Supervisory Union**

Thank you for permitting me to testify before the Committee today regarding the proposed changes to Act 166. In Windham Northeast we have a thriving pre-K program that has been in existence for 16 years. Currently we serve 53 students in our public program, which has classrooms at two sites providing 10 hours a week of instruction. Another 93 students attend private pre-K programs for which we budget and manage the tuition payments. We also currently partner with two private programs that serve a very high needs population in Rockingham, providing a licensed teacher for at least 10 hours a week so that the programs can work toward qualification while parents receive the tuition reimbursements. There is a Headstart Program in Westminster that is administered by the Brattleboro School District. Services at that program have been changeable this year and enrollment has dropped there. Generally we serve between 80 and 90 percent of the three and four year-olds in Windham Northeast through this combined programming, depending upon the year.

Currently parents in our district are underserved in terms of having access to affordable programs that allow them to work full time. The problems with opiate addiction and incarcerated parents are at a critical level, with a significant number of young children experiencing trauma or, in some cases, having been born with a drug addiction.

Our pre-K program has been a vital component of the improvements made over time in student academic performance in Windham Northeast. It is also a very important vehicle for the school system to begin to make connections with families, identify students who are in need of early special education services, and for us to provide parenting support and education. Our part time early ed. principal, Jennifer Keenan Wolfe, has taught in and administered the WNESU program for 16 years. I have been directly involved in the supervision of the program for the past 11 years. Together we have developed the following list of concerns with the early education legislation as it was originally proposed.

We agree that there are revisions that need to be made to the current law to address the dual agency administrative responsibilities over the pre-K program. We agree with most of the provisions that have been proposed as part of this law. However, we feel that there are significant problems that need to be addressed before the bill becomes law. These fall into seven areas, with the funding scheme probably being the most significant.

Financial Impact-

We have calculated, to the best of our ability given the vagueness in some areas of the bill's draft, the tax effects of this legislation using the Equalized Pupil counts

recently provided by the AOE and the proposed FY19 local school budgets. While this is an estimate, I believe that it is quite accurate.

The following tax rate calculations for each of the four Windham Northeast town school districts are based on our best understanding of the proposed legislation and take into account: 1) the reduction in Equalized Pupils; 2) the savings in preschool tuition payments from the town budgets, and; 3) the revenue increases to the towns from the tuition payments made by the state for the students served by the SU early-education program. In all four towns, the result was a tax increase. The reductions in tuition costs and the increases in revenue were easily offset by the losses in Equalized Pupils.

<u>Town</u>	<u>Tax Increase</u>
Athens	\$0.0049
Grafton	\$0.0312
Rockingham	\$0.0524
Westminster	\$0.0650*

* The effect on Westminster's tax rate would actually be greater because the changes in the calculations put the town over the threshold amount. We did not make the tax rate calculation using the threshold excess.

I understand that Windham Northeast is only a medium sized SU and that it is impossible to extrapolate the statewide financial ramifications of this bill from our numbers. Still, it is hard for me to understand why a bill that is (at least in part) aimed at shifting the responsibility of making and administering tuition payments from school districts to the state (and that does not increase these payments) would result in a tax increase. It seems to me that the drafters of this bill did not adequately take into account the powerful effect that changing Equalized Pupil counts has on tax rates. Finally, I would also point out that, for districts that do not operate a preschool, the tax impact would be even greater because they will not receive any tuition revenue.

Loss of Partnering Arrangements and Effects on New Programs

The law removes our ability to partner with private programs that cannot afford to comply with the requirement of providing a licensed teacher. These programs may or may not go out of business, but parents will not get free tuition if they send their children to them. One such private program in the WNESU serves some of our neediest families.

Although there is a provision in the law that appears to allow private providers to contract for a licensed teacher from a school district, there is no incentive for the school districts to do so. It will be harder for school districts to support new private providers as partners to help them build their capacity over time. I recommend that school district partnering with private providers remain in place, with the districts receiving ADM for the students in the partner program.

School districts will be credited with Equalized Pupils, but only if they provide more than 10 hours of pre-K a week. We believe that this will discourage school districts from initiating new preschool programs because the first 10 hours will be mostly paid for at the local level (in combination with some tuition support from the AOE.) For the school districts that currently run ten hour programs, there will be motivation to expand instructional time, but in Windham Northeast this will mean that we provide longer programs for fewer students because of space and personnel limitations. This will contribute to the problem with the lack of preschool programs for families.

I strongly recommend that the ADM count (resulting in more Equalized Pupils) for public programs be retained and expanded beyond the current .46 Equalized Pupils for 10 hours of instruction. This will help school districts expand programing in areas of the state that are underserved. It could also reduce the budget impacts to school districts from the loss of Equalized Pupils served by private providers.

Connections with Families of Young Children

Since pre-K students would no longer be enrolled/registered with the school districts, schools lose the ability to plan for enrollment changes, assist the child find process for special needs children, and make positive connections with families. There needs to be some required mechanism for the school districts to connect with future students. Sharing of enrollment forms between the private and public programs would solve this problem.

Problems with Assessments

Assessments are required as part of the monitoring process for programs (both public and private), but the current assessment used (Teaching Strategies Gold) is not suitable or designed to provided information about program effectiveness. We recommend that there should be some study of early ed. assessments to decide if there is an appropriate assessment that could be used, but not a specific requirement at this time.

Reinventing the Wheel for Licensing Requirements

Licensing requirements and safety and quality requirements for school-based preschool programs will become the responsibility of the Agency of Education (AOE). Agency of Human Services (AHS) has an established system for this and it seems redundant to have AOE reinvent the wheel in this area. There are also questions about AOE's capacity to be able to do this. Recommendation is that AHS licensing requirements remain in place for public pre-K programs.

Requirements Will be Different for Teachers in Private and Public Programs

Private programs will only be required to have a licensed teacher present during the hours that are publicly funded, but are not required to provide direct instruction. Licensed teachers should be teaching, not just on site in the private programs, just as they are in public programs. This is clearly in the best interest of students.

Early Learning Included in School “Plans”

Having a pre-K goal in a school or district plan may not be unreasonable, but it depends upon how onerous this bureaucratic requirement is made to be. It is not clear to me what the inclusion of pre-K in a school plan actually does to improve instruction and learning for students. So far the AOE has not been able to definitively tell us what is required to be in Continuous Improvement Plans in all the other areas, let alone pre-K.

Obviously some of the areas above are less critical than others to address. However, I feel that there are potentially fatal flaws in the bill as it was proposed. I understand that you are working on the wording in some areas and I hope that the commentary above is helpful to you in your efforts. I appreciate and salute the fact that you have established high quality pre-K as priority for the education of Vermont students.