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Prekindergarten testimony  
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today with regard to prekindergarten.

My name is Joanne LeBlanc. For 15 years, I served children and families as the Director of Student Services and Early Childhood Coordinator and for the past 4 years as the Superintendent of Schools. When I was hired back in 1999, I asked the hiring committee who would be the Early Childhood Coordinator- the response was you. My teaching experience was at the middle and high school. My only experience at the time was with my one and half year old child. I quickly learned what Early Childhood Education was about and why it was so important. When I began, pre-kindergarten programs consisted of 2-4 hours of week in 2 locations within the SU. Over the course of 15 years, pre-kindergarten education grew to 2 public programs and a partnership with 7 private providers both within and outside of the SU.

This was prior to Act 166. Together as one partnership we provided families with multiple choices for a program that best met their families needs. Together, we had agreements and tuition payments and a universal system for registration. There was one agreed upon system that supported parents-schools and early childhood programs worked collaboratively to help parents navigate the sometimes confusing and scary journey of selecting a program, completing forms or accessing additional services.

Additionally, this partnership saw the value in working together to ensure that there was a seamless educational experience for all children. Transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten was seamless and supportive for families. This team of professionals met 3 times a year for professional growth-learning about various topics that supported their work for children ages 3-5, such as Trauma in the Classroom. Together, there was a time for planning, discussing the Vermont Early Learning Standards and learning together how best to support children and families.

All of this unfortunately came to an end with the passage of Act 166. The streamlining of registration processes, the support for families, the level of communication and the ability to continue the partnerships between early childhood and kindergarten all ceased. Parents must maneuver the system to secure a prekindergarten program on their own; complete a registration with a provider, then communicate back to the resident school. The opportunity to have a close working relationship between a child's prekindergarten program and the home school is impossible as children are in too many programs and some too far away. The ability to hold a retreat with all providers to share common expectations and create smooth transitions is now impossible. It hasn't been without trying.

While the intent of Act 166 was to provide universal choice for families and provide more opportunities for our youngest children, in some areas in the State, it has had the opposite effect. At the heart of any legislation should be what is best for the children. While there is a need to strike a balance between private providers and public providers, we must not lose sight of the fact that a high

quality prekindergarten education program is critical to preparing our children to be college and career ready. What constitutes a high quality program has been defined through NAEYC, STARS and through our own Vermont Early Learning Standards.

I would like to now address some aspects of this legislation further.

1. Contract management and the AOE responsibility- In an effort to manage this work, the Winooski Valley Superintendents hired a Regional Coordinator to coordinate and create standard contracts, payment systems and common practices. Additionally, each SU also hires an individual to coordinate and serve as a liaison to the Regional Coordinator. This is the level of support needed to serve 12 Supervisory Unions. There is great concern regarding the ability of the AOE to manage all aspects of this complex system without additional supports.
2. Another more pressing concern is the impact of the relationship between public and private providers. A shift to a statewide registration process removes a vital connection between schools and families of young children. Vermont has always been a leader in ensuring that our children receive the supports and services they need. Early intervention is the key to ensuring our children experience success. Without the opportunity to meet with parents at a registration process, we do not have the opportunity to discuss concerns, explain programs and determine needs. Registering a child and thinking about your child entering a prekindergarten program is an emotional experience for families and the child. Having someone who can provide the emotional support or someone to assist in completing forms or processing information provides reassurance to families. For some families, a statewide registration process will create a barrier to access.
3. Along with the registration process is the lost connection between school districts and private providers. This further creates a divide in providing our youngest learners the greatest possible opportunity for success. A disconnect between schools and private programs could negatively impact the opportunity for successful transitions between private programs and public schools- a time when families are anxious about their child entering public school education.
4. Provider Qualifications: Act 166, with respect to provider qualifications has been cumbersome and challenging. The shift to one agency having oversight is necessary. The amount of duplication that occurs and the expense has been burdensome- particularly needing to have staff be fingerprinted twice, particularly when education already requires employees to be fingerprinted and criminal background checked prior to hire. Education licensing also now requires that anyone who is renewing their license must be fingerprinted and criminal background checked. As a Superintendent, safety is the number one priority for all the children and staff that I am responsible for. All educators understand the importance of safety. My experience with the CDD and licensing of a program has been mixed. I have had the CDD to be supportive and helpful when licensing a program most of the time, but I have also experienced where it felt like there was a higher bar that needed to be reached because we were a public school program. An example of this is when a private provider who was offering a prekindergarten program needed to renew their site license. The licensor arrived in March to the site, found no violations and made no recommendations and the site was approved. In June, when the program asked the SU to take over the program at the same facility, this was

a change in licensing, so we had to start the process from the beginning, the licensor would not approve the site for licensure and sited a number of structural things that would need to be changed. There was no change in the structure from March to June.

5. Having a safe environment for children has and always will be at the core of any educational program for children. The AOE has been responsible for providing guidance around school environments for many years and has the prerequisite knowledge to ensure that all programs meet the necessary requirements. Within a school system, there are layers of supervision from the classroom teacher to the building principal to the superintendent and school board. A licensed teacher for this age group is someone who is able to teach birth to Grade 3. This means that a teacher understands the developmental needs for children in this age group.
6. If we are to have high quality educational programs for all our children, then we must have licensed educators present to teach our children. The recent District Management Report on Expanding and Strengthening Best-Practice Supports for Students Who Struggle speaks to the importance of ensuring that all learners receive all instruction from highly skilled teachers. "In this report research is clear: the effectiveness of a teacher has greater impact on student outcomes than any other school based factor..." It is critical that all prekindergarten programs are held to the same standard, merely have a licensed teacher on site is not sufficient if we are to truly prepare our children for the future.
7. Voucher/Tuition: The shift to a tuition model has many implications for families and also funding in local budgets. The portability of the voucher system provides families with more options, but impacts the relationship between providers and schools. The loss of ADM for programs has significant impact on multiple levels: these funds serve to provide program resources for students who are homeless, English Language Learners, and curricular programs to name a few. We have reviewed the impact of losing ADM on each of our local budgets- this would mean an average increase of 3 cents on the Actual Homestead Tax Rate. This would put some of my districts over the threshold, particularly with the challenges school boards have been faced with this year. While I understand that the tuition rate may not remain the same, changes to eliminate ADM will have dramatic impacts on our schools. The ADM model is what is used for all other grade levels and is essential when building budgets and planning for the next school year. Providing additional funding for programs who provide more than ten hours is important.

This legislation is being funded under the Education Spending-given this, why shouldn't education be responsible for its policies, procedures and implementation of best practices, otherwise, it should be transferred to the general fund.

In conclusion, I would like to close by referencing the Brigham decision about providing equitable educational opportunities for all children; Act 46 legislation to ensure that all children have equitable and excellent educational opportunities and Act 166, to provide universal prekindergarten opportunities for all children. To ensure that our children have this, we must make sure they have the most skilled and safe environments to grow. I will refer to the VELs which originated in 2003 and was revised in 2015:

“The importance of high quality early childhood experiences as the foundation for school success and lifelong learning has been demonstrated by research, practice, and public opinion. Plainly said, early experiences matter—whether children are at home, in child care, preschool, kindergarten, or the primary grades. The forces that shape these early experiences are embedded in families, schools, and communities, and are largely controlled by adults who have a stake in children growing and developing to their fullest potential. “