

Testimony on the Revision of Sec 1.829
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The proposed revision to Act 166 have a number of implications for children and families, as well as public schools and private providers.

The bill as written February 2, 2018 protects access to Pre K for vulnerable populations in the Bennington Region overall by continuing to allow private providers to offer Pre K services. This is a welcome component of the bill, as is the reduction in duplication of regulatory agencies for public schools. The allowance for both home and family and private center based providers of Pre K are essential in the Bennington region, which lacks physical capacity to expand public Pre K in our schools.

However, a number of aspects of this bill may have an unintended negative impact on Pre K children in our region. The alignment of Pre K and Kindergarten has been a focus for a number of years in the SVSU, to ensure long term success of children and maintain the gains made in the Pre K years. By removing the contracting and payment for tuition from the local school districts, Pre K children attending private providers (300 of our 365 Pre K seats this year), will no longer be enrolled in the public school as they enter Pre K, and will not be known by the district. This impacts both children and the district in a number of ways.

Enrollment in the Public School Ensures Early Intervention for Students at Risk:

Daily attendance for enrolled pre K children is tracked in the current system, and interventions put in place for children who are at risk of not being successful in Pre K, or who are not attending on a regular basis to benefit from the services. This is made possible by the local district control of the contracting and payment system, which includes monthly attendance reports to be included in the billing.

Many children who begin to demonstrate a poor record of attendance in Pre K can have this trajectory changed by adding supports early on, before this behavior becomes a pattern that has a significant impact on achievement. Children who are chronically absent during Pre K years are more likely to require intervention in reading by second grade (Erlich et al., 2014), and the pattern of chronic absenteeism, if not addressed in Pre K, has been documented likely to carry over into elementary school, having long term impacts on children's achievement (Balfanz and Byrnes 2013; Ehrlich et al. 2014).

One such child identified this year was referred to the SVSU Early Education Educational Support Team, offered as a preventative support by the district. As it turned out, this child stopped attending school due to a medical condition which emerged soon after the school year began. With the support of the child's Pre K Program and the District EST (Educational Support Team), this child has been able to receive medical care by specialists and 504 supports to allow the child to return to school. Without the close partnership and regular tracking of attendance at private partners by the public school district, this outcome would not have been possible in such a short timeframe, and the challenges this child and family were facing would have become clear in the first few critical weeks and months of kindergarten.

Likewise, the District Contracting Procedure in the SVSU articulates the Public Private partner collaboration for universal screening and child find for all children enrolled in Pre K. As part of this district procedure, each child who is enrolled in Pre K is screened at the start of each school year to determine if the child has learning needs that may require intervention, allowing the district Educational Support Team to intervene early and close achievement gaps before they become so great that the child requires special education to access the learning environment. This universal screening for early identification and educational support system is made possible by the public school's contracts with private Pre K providers, which has created a safety net held by the private provider of Pre K and the School District ensuring that children at risk are identified early and provided with preventative supports.

Local Control of Enrollment and Contracting Supports Access to Quality Pre K settings for Vermonters

Another child's story highlights another significant problem created by the proposal to move from local districts management of Pre K enrollment and payment to an AOE managed system. One Pre K student has lived in no fewer than five residences since September, changing guardianship once, and is currently homeless. Our most vulnerable population of children are in and out of DCF custody, and across state lines on a regular basis. It takes the support of the District homeless liaison in partnership with the pre K provider and the district's connection to CIS services to ensure children facing these circumstances are able to continue to access the support of Pre K whenever possible. Children in our region experience poverty at much higher rates than in other regions of the state (79% per the Ready for Kindergarten Survey), and our geographic region requires navigation of shared custody arrangements across state lines in Massachusetts and New York. Establishing and tracking residency takes a significant amount of time and resources. Local management of this issue is essential

to ensure children living in Vermont have access to Pre K, and only those children living in Vermont receive the benefit of the subsidy.

While the contracting process in other areas of the state may be problematic, the Bennington Region is unified under the SVSU, and has just one contract and billing system, which has worked well for private partners and the school district alike in our region. As part of our partnerships, our private partners access high quality professional development provided by the district, individual behavioral consultation by district behavioral specialists and early childhood special educators for children at risk of developing disabilities, and we engage in monthly collaboration for continuous improvement. The local contracting and payment system works well in Bennington for the district and private partners.

Local Enrollment Promotes School District Efficiency

Another important aspect of the local enrollment process relates to children's readiness for kindergarten, and the district's readiness for the incoming kindergarten class. District enrollment for Pre K students allows districts to forecast the need for kindergarten sections and shift staff to address the needs prior to the start of the year. From what we know from the Pre K enrollment this year, Monument Elementary is adding a section of kindergarten in the fall of 2018, as is Molly Stark Elementary. Bennington Elementary stands to reduce a section of kindergarten in the fall. District Pre K enrollment allows districts to shift resources and promote efficiency and class size equity across district schools.

Equity and Access to Pre K

While the proposed bill supports access to educational environments for Pre K students, the language in the bill promotes disparity in the quality of PreK environments children may access; continuing the equity gap for children unable to access the limited public school Pre K slots available in our region. Section a(1) and (2) defines the minimum program quality standards differently for public and private sites, creating disparity in the quality of programming accessed by children attending these sites. Public programs must minimally include an appropriately certified teacher to promote direct instruction, whereas private programs just need to have a certified teacher on site, with no requirement for direct instruction. Some of the larger centers in our region may only have one certified teacher for five classrooms of students, whereas others have one teacher per class; creating great disparity of quality between settings. Decades of research demonstrate the benefits of teacher certification on student achievement, with teacher quality and preparation making the greatest difference in student achievement,

outweighing the impact of factors such as poverty and language (Darling Hammond, 2000).

Certified teachers are difficult to find, hire, and maintain on staff, and these challenges may pose reductions in available Pre K slots for children if a certified teacher were to be required for each classroom. However, the time is now to address the equity issue by supporting private providers to obtain and maintain certified teachers to provide direct instruction to Pre K students. One proposed solution is to create a tiered tuition schedule providing a higher tuition payment for Pre K providers based on the provision of direct instruction for each classroom by a certified teacher. This support could serve to reduce the disparity in pay and benefits offered to teachers between public and private schools, and create greater stability in the workforce while increasing direct instruction time for Pre K children.

Summary:

The Proposed Revision to Act 166 supports the access to Pre K in the Bennington Region by continuing provision of Pre K by both public and private providers. It is recommended that language be included in the bill to require enrollment in the local public school as part of the process to access the tuition voucher to ensure the most vulnerable students have access to district supports, to facilitate the child find process and early intervention, and to align the Pre K and kindergarten systems to maintain the gains realized in the Pre K years. Consideration of ways to support equitable access to direct instruction by a certified teacher in both public and private Pre K settings is recommended, as the research on the link to student achievement is unequivocal.

Works Cited

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