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Written Testimony on Proposed Recommendations to changes for Act 166

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and for your interest in the effects of the proposals around preK. My name is Claire Kendall, Co Executive Director at the Family Center of Washington County. The Family Center is a member of the Parent Child Center Network. Parent Child Centers are a network of 15 community-based non-profit organizations, serving all of Vermont. The focus of each PCC is to provide support and education to families with young children. The goal is to help all Vermont families get off to a healthy start, promote well-being, and build on family strengths.

The Family Center of Washington County has an on-site licensed early care and education program that serves children 6 weeks -5years, at 68 children per day, and over 75 families. We are a 5 STAR prequalified public prek program, and have been participants in accessing what was previously ADM dollars on prek children for almost 10 years now.

Top 3 concerns regarding Recommendations:

Concern 1: There is no Prek infrastructure in AOE to manage taking over sole responsibility of Act 166 in terms of payments, program & staff support. It is important that Act 166 be co-administrated by both the AHS & AOE. Since the intent of the bill is to allow for private licensed programs to participate, in addition to public school programs, then it only makes sense that AHS/CDD be critical representatives at the table in addition to AOE reps, as all licensed Prek programs are accountable to child care licensing standards. CDD has the infrastructure to support the administration of Act 166, whereas AOE does not. There are a variety of efficiencies that are encouraging to see in the recommendations. Many of the proposed recommendations should result in streamlining the process, which is very positive. Co-administration of AHS and AOE is critical to the success of a mixed delivery system.

Concern 2: Concern around the standardization and push downwards of public education rules and laws to 3-5 year olds. The original intent of Act 166 was for families and children to be at the center and for this bill to meet the needs of children by offering access to quality prek education across the state. Increasing changes that have come to light lately are changing the spirit of Act 166 to be heavily public

school driven, with new memo's, standards, rules and limited interpretations, that lean towards a standardized prek education & an administrative focus that is not necessarily in the best interest of young children and families. There are a variety of differences in how Act 166 is implemented between districts or SU's. This confusion is enhanced when it is also unclear how much is decided by the AHS/CDD or AoE versus the local regions, does the Agency of Education set the norms or practices as implementation continues, and parent choice becomes increasingly limited in their young child's education choices.

Concern 3: Parent choice being limited as public school programs grow they compete with private child care and parents will lose community based choices for 3 to 5 year olds. This may end up resulting in more than efficiency in government- this impacts families because where the money goes that is where the choices will eventually end up. There is not enough money in the Child Care Financial Assistance subsidy system, which is in desperate need of a rate increase for providers. Child care programs are not earning enough money to hire and retain licensed teachers. Parent Child Centers struggle to pay qualified staff wages that are comparable to public schools. I have concerns that the increasing competition between private providers and public schools will lead to qualified private providers being squeezed out of business.

There are licensed prek teacher shortages across the state, and it is increasingly difficult for private programs to retain licensed teachers, as public schools have on average better salaries and benefits. This creates a tension within the field between private programs and public schools in terms of hiring teachers. Again, at the inception of this statute, the philosophy was to have equitable child and family friendly access to prek, and that includes choices between a private community based program or a school based program. There are thousands of families across Vermont that are working families and need more than 10hr of preschool a week, and private programs that meet prek qualifications and offer full day/full year child care are a solid option for these families that need extended hours of care, beyond the 10hr/week. It is very concerning to see an increasing number of qualified private child care programs struggle to meet the increasing demands by Supervisory Unions and the shortage and competition for licensed prek teachers, which results in their not being able to participate, which leaves working parents without choices or access to those public tuition dollars. I do not believe this was the original intent or spirit of the law.

There have been many positive experiences our program has had from partnering with the public schools. We have been able to have more joint meetings, increased collaboration, shared professional development opportunities, more coordination around Kindergarten transitions, better early detection and referrals to special education, more seamless supports for children and families for Special Education services, including special educators coming on site and delivering services to children while they are attending our program. This is a win-win model: the child & family benefit from increased access to needed developmental support services, and staff benefit from being able model and learn best practice in terms of meeting each child's individual needs in an inclusive setting.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you have.