



Building Bright Futures

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To: Senate Education Committee

From: Sarah Squirrell, Executive Director, Building Bright Futures

Testimony on AOE's proposed pre-k language

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you this morning about publicly-funded pre-k in Vermont. My name is Sarah Squirrell, and I am the Executive Director of Building Bright Futures, Vermont's public-private partnership and designated Early Childhood Advisory Council to the governor and legislature. Act 104 is the Vermont statute that authorizes BBF's role and outlines BBF's 16 duties and powers. BBF is charged with monitoring the overall early, care and education system and advising the administrations and general assembly on the status of the early care, health and education system and providing policy and systems improvement recommendations. Through Act 104, BBF also has the authority and duty to convene members of the early care and learning community, medical community, education community, and other organizations, as well as state agencies serving young children, to ensure that families receive quality services in the most efficient and cost effective manner.

BBF also serves as backbone organization to the entire early childhood system in Vermont. A backbone organization is key defining feature of a collective impact approach; which is an important idea for Vermont as collective impact is the key to solving the complex social problems at a sufficient scale for meaningful impact. BBF has a statewide infrastructure that is comprised of:

- BBF Early Childhood State Advisory Council
- 12 Regional Councils
- Early Childhood Action Plan
- Vermont Insights

Building Bright Futures is committed to ensuring that all age-eligible children have access to Vermont's universal, publically funded pre-k program. Earlier this month we released our annual *How Are Vermont's Young Children and Families Report?* The latest edition of the report included information on pre-k in our state, and shared that participation is strong, with approximately 8,800 age-eligible children enrolled during the 2016-2017 school year. This represents a 55% increase in participation in publicly-funded pre-K programming since the 2014-2015 school year, the school year directly before early implementation of Act 166. Participation in publicly-funded pre-K programming for the 2014-2015 school year was 5,681 children. Based on the participation data, 72% of age-eligible children participated in UPK in the 2016-2017 school year.¹

We appreciate the Senate Education Committee's attention to issue of publicly funded pre-k in our state and the opportunity to provide testimony on the Building Bright Futures role in gathering public input on the AOE's proposed pre-k language.

BBF's Statewide Public Input Process

In December of 2017, the Vermont Agencies of Education and Human Services released a joint report recommending proposed changes to universal pre-k and subsequently the AOE has released newly proposed pre-k language and changes to Act 166, Vermont's Universal Pre-Kindergarten legislation. It is important that those most impacted by the law have an opportunity to weigh in on any changes. The Agency of Education has proposed that Building Bright Futures (BBF), in its role as early childhood advisor to the administration and legislature, use its state and regional council infrastructure to gather feedback on the Act 166 recommendations and proposed legislative changes in order to present a report to the legislature in early March 2018.

Throughout February 2018, BBF will convene conversations in each of its 12 regions to gather feedback on the Act 166 recommendations and proposed legislative changes. These conversations may take place at the previously scheduled February BBF regional council meeting, or a region may decide to hold a special meeting for this purpose. Meeting dates, times, and locations for each region will be publicized in early February. BBF will work to promote these meetings to those most involved in the implementation of Act 166, including local school leadership and school and community-based PreK providers. Any other interested early childhood stakeholders/community members would be welcome to participate.

AOE has volunteered to send staff to these regional meetings to answer questions and provide clarification if desired. They would also respect a region's desire to provide candid feedback without anyone from the Agency present. BBF Regional Coordinators will record feedback from these discussions using a common template, which will allow BBF to pull together a summary report. BBF will present this report to the legislature in early March as an overview of what we heard in the regions regarding the proposed changes to Act 166. If legislation is passed this session, BBF will also partner with AOE to ensure robust stakeholder engagement throughout the Administrative Rulemaking process this summer and fall.

BBF would advise this committee be partners in this important public input process, to hear the voices of our communities, and to utilize the information from the statewide public input process to inform your review and action related to AOE's proposed pre-k language.

Pre-K Supply and Demand Analysis

Based on BBF's responsibility under Act 166, BBF will conduct an evaluation to assess the supply and demand of prequalified pre-kindergarten education programs in Vermont? Specifically, BBF will attempt to answer the question: "Does the supply of slots in prequalified pre-kindergarten programs meet their demand in each of Vermont's regions?" BBF, in conjunction with Vermont Insights (a program of BBF), will conduct a survey-based assessment of all prequalified pre-kindergarten education programs in Vermont. The survey will obtain point-in-time data not collected by the Bright Futures Information System or other sources, including information like:

- Number of sessions offered, per week
- Days and times sessions are offered, per week
- Number of slots offered per session, per week
- Slot restrictions, if any, per week
- Self-reported capacity vs demand
- Other program information, as needed

Population estimates or school census data for 3, 4, and 5 year olds will be used to provide context around demand. Survey administration will be conducted by BBF and Vermont Insights, with oversight by AOE, in the spring of 2018. The survey will be both email- and phone-based.

Recommendation

Building Bright Futures advises that the committee take under thoughtful consideration the final report of the statewide public input that we commit to deliver the first week in March 2017 or earlier. We believe that this public input process is an ideal opportunity to bring together the testimony of community members, public and private teachers, parents, childcare providers, public school leadership and private program directors and owners. This valuable feedback on proposed legislation will allow us to make solid, well thought out policy decisions that will benefit generations of Vermont children to come.

Thank you for your consideration of the comments. We look forward to continuing to work with you to better support Vermont's young children, their families and communities.

Sincerely,

Sarah Squirrell, MS
Executive Director, Building Bright Futures

Additional Documents:

- Overview of PreK Proposed Statutory and Rule Changes
- BBF public input activity timeline for Legislative Session and State Board of Education Rule Process
- Schedule and location of regional public input meetings

ⁱ Analysis conducted by Building Bright Futures using 8,800 as the number of children enrolled in UPK programs and 12,292 as the population of children age-eligible for UPK. Population data is from the Vermont Department of Health's 2016 population estimates by county, age, and sex.