



Vermont
Superintendents
Association



To: Members of the House Education Committee
From: Chelsea Myers, Director of Communications and Professional Development for the Vermont Superintendents Association
Sandra Cameron, Director of Public Policy for the Vermont School Boards Association
Re: PreK Continuity of Learning and Act 166 During the COVID-19 Pandemic
Date: April 17, 2020

Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting us to speak on behalf of the Vermont School Boards Association and the Vermont Superintendents Association on Continuity of Learning and Act 166 during the COVID-19 school closure period.

Relationships and social and emotional development are at the forefront of continuity of learning for early learners. A number of states and local school systems have set developmentally appropriate recommendations of approximately 30 minutes of engagement per day for preschool students without requiring sustained attention for more than five minutes at a time (e.g. [Illinois State Board of Education](#)). Key to successful distance learning for PreK students is trusting relationships between students and adults.

On March 26, 2020, Governor Phil Scott directed schools to make preparations for the continuation of learning for students from PreK to Grade 12 for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. Subsequent [guidance from the Agency of Education](#) specified the following in regards to Prekindergarten education in Vermont:

- Continuity of Learning for PreK students as required through the Governor's directive, should be developmentally appropriate, and focus on social and emotional development.
- The Agency of Education will provide developmentally appropriate learning resources to the field to help with the implementation of Continuity of Learning to PreK students.
- School districts should support all resident PreK students, including those that were served in private programs prior to the COVID-19 crisis.
- Private programs will continue to receive Act 166 funding regardless of their operational status.

Given the state's mixed delivery model, there are many districts in which the majority of their resident prekindergarten students are served by private providers. As private programs have closed or dramatically reduced their operation, many of these students' Continuity of Learning will fall on public schools that have no prior relationships with the students or their families. There is a fundamental conflict between the assumption that public school staff can meaningfully assume the responsibility for delivering a Continuity of Learning Plan focused on social emotional skills and the widely accepted theory that social emotional skills

are built through meaningful relationships. As stated in the Vermont Early Learning Standards, “Each and every child develops and learns trust and respect through nurturing, responsive, and predictable relationships with family members, early childhood professionals and other adults and children.”

Currently, school districts are only staffed to support the needs of the students that attend their public PreK programs. In some cases, districts are now asked to take on hundreds of new students and their families to support Continuity of Learning. To the best of our knowledge, there is no additional funding to support this new requirement and existing Act 166 tuition payments are being directed to private programs in order to support their financial stability during closure.

The responsibilities of public schools during the COVID-19 crisis has grown and will continue to grow. Given the developmental needs of young students and the fiscal and capacity constraints of the mixed delivery system to provide Continuity of Learning to PreK students, we offer the following recommendations:

- Create a central location for resources for families of PreK students. Here are a few examples:
 - [Boston Dept of Early Learning](#)
 - [NYC: Early Childhood Learn at Home](#)
 - [Miami-Dade County Public Schools: Instructional Continuity Plan](#) - page 8 (PreK)
 - [Indiana DOE COVID-19 Remote Learning Resources \(PreK\)](#)
- School districts should send communications to families regarding available resources through, for example, their website, community forums, email, or other means of communication.
- Public providers will continue to ensure the provision of Early Childhood Special Education services and support families of children with special needs to the greatest extent possible.
- Public and private providers that have *existing* relationships with students, should connect with their students and direct them to the common location for resources. The Act 166 funds directed to providers can be used to support these one-to-one interactions with families.
- All agencies and programs that support PreK students should collaborate to develop a system that connects students and families with essential support services.

In the wake of this crisis, the General Assembly will have an opportunity to reflect and act on our existing systems, including how we educate and care for our youngest Vermonters. We ask that you consider the following observations from the COVID-19 crisis:

1. The existing PreK delivery system is not able to provide Continuity of Learning and support to all students.
2. School districts are being called upon to play *the* central role in ensuring equity, quality, and accountability for all publicly funded PreK students' Continuity of Learning.

3. Shifting the responsibility of Continuity of Learning to public programs on behalf of private PreK programs that are continuing to be paid, regardless of whether the child continues to be enrolled, points to significant fiscal instability in the current system.
4. The pressures on financial resources for education now and for the foreseeable future will exacerbate the consequences of existing fiscal and education delivery inefficiencies.
5. All students will return to school with increased needs for support.

It is abundantly clear that COVID-19 has far-reaching consequences. Vermont needs a clear vision for high-quality publicly funded early education and reliable and affordable childcare to contend with the new reality.

Thank you.

CC Jeffrey Francis, Executive Director for the Vermont Superintendents Association
 Sue Ceglowski, Executive Director for the Vermont School Boards Association