



Thursday, January 16th, 2020

To: House Human Services and House Education Committee
From: Dr. Morgan Crossman, Executive Director, Building Bright Futures

Testimony on the findings of Building Bright Futures' information gathering effort on Universal Prekindergarten (UPK)

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you this morning about publicly-funded prekindergarten in Vermont. My name is Dr. Morgan Crossman, and I am the Executive Director at Building Bright Futures (BBF). I am also the mom of a 2-and-a-half-year-old, who was just registered for prekindergarten education. BBF is 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 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; collective impact is a key approach for Vermont 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 & 7 aligned committees
- Vermont Insights – publicly accessible early childhood data

Building Bright Futures is committed to ensuring that all age-eligible children have access to a 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 8600 age-eligible children enrolled during the 2018-2019 school year, which has increased by more than 2,000 children since 2014.

We appreciate the House Human Services and House Education Committees' collective attention on the issue of publicly funded pre-k in our state and the opportunity to provide testimony on Building Bright Futures' role in gathering public input on statewide successes, mechanisms of success, persistent barriers and ways to move forward.

Background

In 2014, the Vermont Legislature passed ACT 166, which provided publically funded pre-kindergarten education for all 3, 4 and 5 year olds who were not age-eligible for kindergarten. In 2017, the Vermont Legislature heard testimony from many parties about challenges and opportunities for improvement in the implementation of Act 166, resulting a request from the Secretaries of Education and Human Services, for BBF to use its state and regional council infrastructure to gather feedback on the 8 recommendations for changes to the law (e.g. comments, questions and suggests on statutory changes to Act 166). BBF presented the results of the feedback in March 2018. As of yet, the legislature has not made any changes to Act 166.

Recognizing the importance of supporting the Legislature and the administration in making key decisions about how to move forward with Act 166, BBF designed a second statewide information gathering session, specifically focused on successes since the enactment of Act 166, mechanisms of success, persistent challenges

and ways to improve. Forums were designed to complement the PreK report prepared by the Education Development Center (EDC) and Childcare Demand Study, deepening our understanding of the landscape of Vermont's UPK administration, implementation, partnerships and systems.

Objective

The purpose of this information gathering effort was to utilize BBF's statewide and regional networks to ask those directly impacted by Act 166 to identify perceptions of success, where and why it's been successful and to share best practices, also outline persistent barriers to successful UPK administration and implementation. The forthcoming report is intended to provide an objective overview and synthesis of the feedback gathered to inform agency partners, the administration and respective legislative committees about statewide perceptions of UPK.

Methods

Focus Groups. In partnership with regional collaborators, BBF held semi-structured focus groups during regional forums to collect qualitative information on UPK statewide during November and December 2019. Thirteen in-person regional forums were held across the state of Vermont.

Electronic Feedback Form. In addition, an electronic feedback form (with the same questions as the focus groups) was widely disseminated to elicit participation from those who were unable to attend a regional forum in person. Respondents were given approximately 4 weeks to complete the survey.

Participants

Focus Groups. 199 participants from 26 unique sectors/organizations, including the following:

- Parents or caregiver
- Child Care Providers
- Private PreK Teachers
- Private PreK Program Directors/Owners
- PreK Coordinators
- Public PreK Teachers
- Parent Child Center Representatives
- Children's Integrated Services (CIS) Provider
- Superintendents
- Public Health
- Mental Health
- Housing
- Legislators
- Advocacy partners
- Head Start
- Help Me Grow
- Town Government
- CCV
- United Way
- School district administrator
- Early childhood community member
- VECN Leader
- Let's Grow Kids
- Early Head Start
- Northern Lights
- Blueprint

Electronic Feedback Form. 169 participants, categories were not mutually exclusive

- Parents or caregiver
- Private PreK Program Director/Owner
- Child care providers
- Private PreK Teacher
- Public PreK Teachers
- Superintendent/Princ.
- preK Coordinator
- Business owners
- Advocates
- Early childhood special educator
- Dir. of Student Services
- Children's Integrated Services (CIS) Provider
- Grandparents
- Head Start Directors
- Facilitators of an Early Learning Readiness Program
- Board members and staff of Parent Child Centers (PCCs)
- School board members
- Early childhood education consultants, directors & Spec. Ed. Coordinators
- School nurses
- private preK administrators
- Mental health professionals
- Library Directors
- Educators, Pediatricians
- Public Health Professionals
- Public PreK special educator

Results

The 4 key themes identified in the analysis were:

- 1) Statewide successes in UPK
- 2) Statewide mechanisms of success
- 3) Regional variation in mechanisms of success
- 4) Persistent statewide barriers in UPK administration and implementation

Theme 1: Statewide Successes in UPK

Vermont has made substantial progress in providing educational opportunities for our youngest children. As a state, we recognize the importance of impacts of the early childhood period as the foundation for future development and life course outcomes for children. Our creative statewide, regional and local partners have implemented innovative engagement strategies to promote greater participation in early care and education. Collective responses from our communities suggest that having access to 10 hours of prekindergarten education (PreK) hours provides the following:

- Financial support to families
- Providing additional opportunities for child development and education
- Enhancing development, learning and readiness for kindergarten
- Public and private partnership and networking opportunities for communities (coaching, mentoring, professional development)
- Dedication towards continuous statewide system improvement
- Diversity in program type and structure (mixed delivery) supporting children and families, providing access and choice
- Awareness of the importance of early childhood education starting before age 5
- Increased UPK enrollment
- Less staff turnover
- Access to high quality learning experiences
- Reaching more families, specifically those who wouldn't have had access due to affordability etc.
- Increased collaboration across sectors and programs (head start, public, private, families, WIC, nutrition/meal programs, health)
- Increased public conversation around community needs, spots and access

Theme One: Statewide Successes in Universal PreK
Illustrative Quotes
<p>“I have seen [success] in in-home preschool programs, center-based programs, and Head Start programs. I think having a variety of structures allows parents to choose a program that best meets the needs of their family and their child's learning style.”</p>
<p>“Our son has completely blossomed in so many ways since he started attending Pre-K. He is more interactively social; he thrives in a structured environment; he is learning to navigate challenging situations; expression of his imagination has flourished; he is completely engaged in learning and singing. These are only a handful of examples of how our son has immersed himself in his Pre-K program. We are so proud of him and the amazing teachers who help guide him every day.”</p>

Theme 2: Statewide Mechanisms of Success

UPK liaison or point person. This sub-theme represents an identified individual tasked with having expertise about Act 166 and UPK implementation, supporting early childhood educators and professionals as they promote universal preschool in communities. Collectively, these individuals may also help to provide effective and efficient communications to local and state partners about UPK needs. Community feedback consistently referenced the importance of a clearly identified UPK liaison or point person, although variation in roles and models exist. Perceptions about the importance of this role offered insights to the necessity for local partnership and communication.

Partnerships among public and private community entities. Respondents consistently articulated the importance of existing and strengthened communication, relationships and partnerships across all levels of our system to smooth transitions for families, streamline individual efforts and reduce duplication.

Theme 2: Perception of Statewide Mechanisms Supporting Success	
Concepts	Illustrative Quotes
<i>UPK liaison or point person that supports direct program providers</i>	“[Success is clear] when school districts have Act 166 Coordinator who understand and know the law”
	“As the coordinator for public school PreK and Early Childhood Special Education, I feel our district manages to create relationships with partner programs to support them in a multitude of ways - observing children, providing feedback and training as needed, providing early childhood Title One services to at-risk students, meeting with families and providers, identifying children with special needs and providing services, as well as participating in district and regional groups that support our families. In order to do this, we have a PreK/ECSE Coordinator and an Act 166 Coordinator.”
<i>Partnerships among public and private community entities</i>	“Building strong relationships between partner providers, public pre-k teachers, and the local school district administration is a huge change maker. When the supervisory union reaches out to share resources, training opportunities, and partner staff, the benefits for children increase and trust among adults builds to create better outcomes.”
	“Alignment around the value of UPK, which provides a common rally point. UPK is seen as an integration point allowing partners to have a shared identity.”

Theme 3: Regional Innovations and Mechanisms of Success

Regional innovations and mechanisms of success reflect the current methods individual regions and districts have developed to smooth transitions and implement UPK. More concretely, mechanisms are examples of systems and structures currently in place (i.e. communication, standardization/protocols, relationships among key partners, etc.) that contribute to a regions' ability to successfully implement UPK (e.g. examples of what's working well within regions). In some instances, there may be potential for scalability or opportunities to modify for replication and scalability statewide. Overall, these mechanisms highlight the progress made within communities.

Partnership & Collaboration within Regions

- Formalizing collaboration
 - Consortia & Learning Collaboratives:
 - “We have a consortium in our region designed to streamline the collaboration between and among school districts and private preK partners. This structure provides for an excellent support mechanism to ensure our private partners have regular communication from the schools.” (Addison)
 - Early Learning Partners (ELP)– collaboration and standardization (Chittenden)
 - Joint Meetings
 - First state-wide coordinators meeting (Springfield)
- Integration and Continuous Improvement
 - The Same Page Initiative (Springfield)
 - Resource sharing (e.g. professional development) (Southeast VT)
- Protocols & Standardization
 - Universal common enrollment form (NWO)
 - Standardized invoices (Central VT)
- Innovations
 - Transportation
 - “We’ve had children take the bus in order to attend a program outside of their town which better meets their needs. For part day programs, a bus to local child care was successful. Providing before and after care also removes barriers for parents.” (Brattleboro)
 - Having private child care and public preK in the same building

Theme 4: Persistent Barriers

1. Administration
 - a. Variation in perceptions of agency partnership and oversight
 - i. There's no consensus around agency oversight.
 - ii. Perception of the field is that there's a lack of communication between those 2 agencies.
"The bifurcation of the system between CDD and AOE does impact the overall monitoring and operation. I think the 2 agencies have different goals and need to have a common understanding of the needs of students and families and communities not just the funding of the programs and administration."
 - b. Lack of standardization and systems
 - c. Variation in financial management and pay equity.
"Teachers that are available and affordable to home and center-based providers would be very helpful. We cannot provide our communities with affordable and accessible childcare [and education] if the provisions we need are not as affordable and accessible to us. "
 - d. Lack of monitoring and evaluation
2. Access for children/parents and capacity of providers
 - a. Transportation
 - b. Financial barriers for families and children
 - c. Capacity
 - i. Provider and program capacity to serve the # of eligible children
 - ii. Availability of quality workforce
3. Equitable access for all children
 - a. Specific sub-groups of the larger population are struggling to access UPK
 - i. Children with special health care needs and those with religious affiliation
 - ii. Variability in access based on timing of 3rd birthday
 - b. Overall # of hours: Currently the law provides access to 10 hours of publicly-funded preK for 35 weeks annually. Respondents continually suggested that 10 hours is not enough, but there was no consensus on a more appropriate total number of hours.
 - c. Awareness & messaging: Families aren't fully informed about UPK, which creates confusion. Further, there is variability in how districts interpret the law.
"We have a very transitory population and I constantly run into families that do not know what is available to them or how to access UPK funds."
4. Transitions
 - a. Longitudinal and daily transitions for families (transportation)

Conclusions

- **Continued investment:** There was great intent for this model and we are talking about how to strengthen the implementation. Collectively, Vermonters care that families have access to high quality services and we share investment in supporting success for kids and building the best system we can. There is statewide recognition on the importance of UPK and supporting development and early childhood education. Investment in Prek is clearly investment in the larger system. The mixed delivery model, specifically in terms of having both public and private opportunities for families to access UPK is important. Now we need to take what's working well and bring it to scale while keeping the focus on how the system is supporting optimal outcomes for children.
- **Monitoring & Evaluation:** We need to implement a robust monitoring and evaluation system to support decision-making
 - Clarity on how this is being evaluated state wide including key measures and outcomes, where there are gaps/missing data
- **Collaboration:** Invest in collaboration & building capacity to work together. Relationships are key statewide. It takes time to collaborate from all parties. How do we invest in this collaboration?
- **Clarity and messaging:** Clarity around agency roles, responsibilities, regulations, vision, direction and communication/messaging
- **Standardization:** Supporting administrative standardization (e.g. protocols, forms, checklists, etc.)
- **Access for sub-populations:** Focus on access for children with disabilities and special health care needs and seamless transition and navigation for those families
- **Transportation:** Review creative regional solutions to support transportation needs given the rural nature of our state
- **Workforce development:** NEED to recruit and retain quality workforce and provide professional development opportunities and provide competitive compensation. The system is struggling to a point where it threatens collaborations. Both public and private programs suffer when they can't retain staff.
- **Keep the child in the center of all decision-making.**