

TO: House Committee on Education

FROM: Colin Robinson, Political Director, Vermont-NEA

DATE: January 29, 2020

SUBJECT: Testimony on an Act Related to Prekindergarten Education – Draft 2.1

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak briefly today about draft 2.1 of the committee’s prekindergarten technical fix bill. On behalf of the 13,000 teachers and school support staff members of Vermont-NEA we are happy to see many of these technical, but impactful, adjustments.

In my testimony yesterday on H.804, I highlighted the complex social and emotional challenges children carry with them when they walk through the doors of their schools. These are issues tied to poverty, mental health and addiction that impact student’s ability to access learning. Our members are seeing this trend continuing to grow among our youngest children. What we all know and can agree on is that access to high quality early care and learning have direct impacts on students, and their families, future success. As Vermont-NEA has testified to in previous legislative sessions, we believe that the best way to ensure we have a high-quality prekindergarten system that is truly universal, equitable and sustainable is by building out our already existing public prekindergarten programs. As we know from the recent reports public school prekindergarten programs enroll significantly higher percentage of special education students or student from poverty. It is logical and impactful that these students are receiving their prekindergarten education in public schools from licensed educators and they have access to more comprehensive supports that will allow for them to be more successful as they transition to kindergarten and beyond. However, for these same reasons, we do not believe that the current mixed delivery structure is either sustainable or equitable for students and families. Additionally, it is important to note that Act 166 will not be truly universal until it is full-time, full year and addresses issues related to transportation.

I want to move on to specific comment regarding draft 2.1.

- We are happy to see that the bill works to continue to improve the quality of all programs by requiring private programs to have at least four STARS.
- We believe that draft should be adjusted to make it clear that a licensed educator in a private program should provide direct instruction for the full 10 hours, and not merely provide “regular, active supervision and training of the private provider’s staff”. Act 166 is a public prekindergarten program and the requirements for private programs should mirror those of the public programs.
- We believe it is good public policy to remove the requirements that public schools seek permission to expand prekindergarten programs. Public schools through their elected school boards and in conversation with parents and community stakeholders are best equipped to make these decisions for their communities at the local level.

- We do have some concerns about the bifurcation of the regulation. Since the implementation of Act 166 this has been a fraught issue. We continue to support having the Agency of Education provide sole oversight to the public programs, as they do now for children age five and older who attend public schools. We also believe that since Act 166 is a public education program, funded by the Education Fund, that it makes sense for all qualified prekindergarten programs accepting Act 166 vouchers to be regulated by the Agency of Education.
- Weighting has been and will continue to be a topic of consideration in this committee. As the conversation moves forward, we hope that the General Assembly evaluates the current weighting for prekindergarten students and any adjustments that should be made.

Thanks for your work on this issue and we look forward to continuing the conversation.