

Hello, and thank you for the opportunity to be here today. My name is Heather Martin, I am an early education center director with over 20 years of experience in the field. My current role is the director of the Castleton University Early Education Center; previously I spent many years as the director of the Children's Center in Proctor VT. In addition to my role as a center director I am a VTAEYC (Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children) board member. VTAEYC is the Vermont chapter of NAEYC, the National organization that is the authority on the education of young children. I was pleased to see NAEYC referenced in your current UPK bill. I want to talk more about NAEYC and I brought slides that detail their most recent work, but first I will give you a little background on my work history.

During my time as the Children's Center Director, I grew the enrollment from 12 to over 40, to a mid-sized program. I was able to achieve a high-quality STARS accreditation and pre-k partnership under Act 62 in 2013, before Act 166 was in place. For several years before this achievement, I worked to meet high-quality initiatives, and even reached out to a nearby preschool program that was struggling financially, in hopes of collaboration. The program was not STARS accredited, but had a licensed teacher and it was a quality program. I offered a partnership in which they would come under my "umbrella" and gain the high-quality STARS accreditation. My program would gain a licensed teacher that was directly teaching preschool full-time. We agreed to pool our resources and in one year her enrollment went from 4 children to maximum capacity. During that first year, I paid my center preschool staff to work directly with her at scheduled times throughout the entire school year. As they worked with her, I met periodically with staff to provide guidance as they progressed on the early childhood career ladder. Receiving the Act 166 funding helped to pay enough of the salary of the licensed teacher, so that I was able provide extra training and support for my staff. When I started as the Children's Center director in 2005, I was the only staff person that had a college degree, or had even taken a college class. Today, it is a very different picture, 9 of their 11 staff have degrees.

Although this is an example of how a center-based program can thrive with just a fraction of the funding and support afforded to public programs, there are challenges. The Children's Center is currently being affected by the Rutland North East Supervisory Union Region. They have served children that reside in that district for decades as they are 1 mile from the Pittsford Border, and located just off of a direct commute from Pittsford to Rutland. Families from Pittsford with children in pre-K at the Children's Center have never been able to access Act 166 funding since the Rutland Northeast SU Region won't support children accessing education outside the district. Most often these children have been with the center since they were very young, so they would literally need to leave the program at age 3, or the family can't access Act 166 funding and the center takes a loss. In other cases, the children may need specialized care or be in state custody, so they need to be enrolled in a qualifying program. The center has opted to serve a number of high needs children that reside in that district, at a loss of Act 166 funding for families and the center. This dynamic has created a loss of thousands of dollars to the Children's Center since 2013, due to that one region alone. In spite of this challenge, the mixed delivery system has been a success for this center and the families that it serves.

Now I would like to take some time to go over NAEYC's vision for the early childhood profession as a whole and then I will touch on specifics about the UPK bill. NAEYC's mission is to "promote high quality early learning for all children birth - 8, by connecting practice, policy, and research. They advance a diverse, dynamic early childhood profession and support all who care for, educate, and work on behalf of young children". In keeping with that mission, NAEYC created a task force to help achieve their ultimate goal of high-quality early childhood education for all children. Based on Research from the

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, the task force has identified 5 key takeaways that need to be in place in order to achieve their vision. Those are the following: 1) The benefits outweigh the costs, 2) Financial Investments create a Quality Workforce, 3) The Quality of the Workforce depends on Accessibility of Higher Education and Professional Development, 4) A mixed delivery system is needed to ensure all children have access, 5) Everyone is responsible for the cost. Includes parents as well as local, state and federal governments. Our current system is funded by parents, early educators and low-income assistance programs, as many childcare teachers qualify for state assistance.

NAEYC has created a movement called “Power to the Profession” to address the 5 key takeaways that are needed for the early education field to provide the highest level of education for children, ages 0-8. Power to the Profession is a “national collaboration to define the early childhood profession by establishing a unifying framework for career pathways, knowledge, and competencies, qualifications, standards, and compensation.” The graphic here shows that NAEYC has put all early education teachers, across all settings in one category. Their research shows that supporting center based and family childcare programs with the same financial resources is essential to growing high quality programs across the United States. Power to the Profession does specifically mention that all early childhood professionals that meet certain qualifications have the right to the same compensation, regardless of their work setting, as they are all being held to the same standard. NAEYC is aware that this is an investment; however research shows that it is one that pays for itself as it benefits the economy.

So all of this can seem pretty intimidating, however, Vermont already has components of this in place! In my time as a director, over the last 15 years, I have seen an incredible transformation in Vermont’s Early Childhood field. Change is hard, and takes time and yes, we are in the midst of an early educator staffing crisis; however the tide has started to turn. I have started to see interest, and even enthusiasm in our work force. Last month I hired two teachers back into the workforce that had left years ago. One with a Bachelor’s degree and one without. They had both heard rumblings about higher standards, professional development resources, and degree scholarship programs, and even possible wage supports. Your efforts to unite the field and offer support are starting to work. It is just a trickle right now, but it is much better than it was 2 years ago when teachers were leaving in droves. We are at a critical juncture for early education in Vermont. With more investment and support right now, we will start to finally see real results, but if it stays stagnant or falls off we will lose the precious amount of progress that we have started to make. We are truly a case in point for NAEYC’s Power to the Profession research. The changes that were made to VT’s early education system over the last 10 years, have quite a few common threads with NAEYC’s vision. If we can strengthen those threads, then we will be well on our way to delivering the highest quality early education a child can receive in the United States.

As we work to develop our system, we need to keep NAEYC’s vision in mind. This will help us to chart a path in the right direction when we face challenges and uncertainties. I do want to address pieces of the UPK bill that will work against progress that we have recently made, as I know we all want what is best for Vermont’s children.

- The law implies that public funding is going to public programs unless parents make a request otherwise.
 - This puts a burden on parents to navigate a system in which they do not fully understand.

- NAEYC’s vision requires that all early educators have access to the same funding system, therefore all qualifying providers that serve preschool age children should be able to access funding through the same process without delay.
 - If parents do not have to request funding for a public provider, they should not have to for a private one.
 - Providers that are new to the pre-k delivery system find this process confusing.
- I would like it to be specified throughout the bill that private providers both within and outside school districts of residence can receive funding. I saw language a few times that could possibly be interpreted as public programs get the funding unless a parent makes a request to use a private or public provider outside the district.
- Page 17, lines 1-4, “rules that apply to public and private providers are aligned, except to the extent that there are compelling reasons”
 - I would like more definition here, as I am concerned that this could lead to public programs making a case to change some rules that are more difficult to comply with; however private providers would not have the ability to do so because they are subject to all CDD regulations in order to be in compliance as a regulated child care program.
 - The Agency of Human Services has developed many of the programs and rules that affect Vermont’s youngest children. They have deep expertise in early childhood development. It is imperative that they still have governance over the public delivery system as well as the private.
- Allowing school districts to form regions is not in the spirit of the mixed delivery system that NAEYC is promoting and will fragment Vermont’s system further than it is currently. Giving school boards the authority to create regions, gives them the ability to leverage the system in a way so they maximize the amount of funding within the public-school system. This cuts off children that need care at private programs both within and outside their district. Many families need care closer to where they work, or have multiple children and want their infants and toddlers in the same location as their preschool children. Regardless of the reason, NAEYC has already completed the research that says equal funding accessible to all early educators, regardless of setting is best for early education. Increasing regions will be detrimental to what little funding equity we have currently have.
 - The bill specifies that districts work with programs that already have established partnerships. I am not seeing that it specifies that districts have to work with programs that are newly qualified for Act 166?
 - If this is the case, it will lead to a situation in which new programs work to gain a high-quality accreditation, and complete the qualification process only to find that school districts are not accepting any new partnerships. The provider will have no right to contest this and no means of accessing the funding that they thought they qualified for. This is not providing equal access to funding as required by NAEYC’s vision.
 - This could easily be the situation with the Castleton Program. When we open, we will be recruiting licensed teachers, and I have been operating high-quality programs consistently for years now, but the STARS process is slow and cumbersome for new private programs. We will not be able to achieve four STARS for about a year under the current rules and therefore it will delay

funding and make tuition unnecessarily high for area parents. If regions are allowed to pass, we could potentially be excluded from Act 166 funding after finally achieving 4 STARS and a prequalification status.

- Why are working to increase early care and education capacity around the state and encouraging early educators to get degrees if they will be cut off from the funding for which they could qualify?
- Increasing regions will cause childcare costs to drastically increase and will lead to more program closures.
 - Public programs serve pre-k-12 and are backed by public funding. The other classrooms that exist within their school are also backed with public funding.
 - Private programs often take a loss or barely break even when serving infants and toddlers. The preschool program is often needed to pay for the basic expenses of operating a business (whether or not the program has public funding), because the other classrooms create a deficit.
 - Private programs are continually fighting to make up for losses and have fragmented, inconsistent revenue. The public funding allows them a consistent, reliable way to pay for a high-quality teacher. It is critical that this funding not be jeopardized by regions.
 - The subsidy reimbursement rates would need to drastically be increased if regions were allowed, because private programs would lose preschool age children and have to rely on infant/toddler classrooms for income.
- If we go back to my example in the beginning, the Children's Center is only dealing with one region and has lost thousands of dollars since 2013. They currently serve children from 4 different districts.

Establishing regions and fragmenting our mixed delivery system is counter to NAEYC's vision and a step backwards from the progress that we made just a few years ago. As we work to improve our system, we need to be careful that we don't create laws that are just to the benefit of one type of provider. What is best for the education of young children needs to be at the heart of every decision. Nowhere in the 2019 report "Transforming the Financing of Early Education" does it say that fragmenting public pre-k funding with regions or bifurcation of the system is in the best interest of education, in fact it specifically states the opposite.

Some important points to not lose sight of, we need to:

- Leave public pre-k funding available to all providers who qualify without delay or requests.
- Write in protections for private providers that guarantee funding upon qualification and enrollment of pre-k students.
- Create opportunities for public and private providers to work together to create laws, or provide feedback to ensure high-quality with a clear, well defined delivery system.
 - Many of the regulations or systems that the public programs found challenging and cumbersome, the private providers have similar issues with, working together can create a better system.

- There could be adaptations within the rules for public or private, but only one set of rules is a must, not two. We cannot have a cohesive system with entirely different sets of rules.
- The reason that it's hard to fit early education into public rules is because it is not the same thing as K-12. The population has very different needs and changing the rules to fit with the K-12 system considers what is best for the public system, not what is best for the children.

Bifurcation of the early education system in Vermont is not in the best interest of our families and would make our system less efficient, not more. The Agency of Human Services has created our childcare regulation system and STARS accreditation system after years of careful research. They clearly have knowledge of NAEYC's work as they have included elements of NAEYC's vision into our STARS system. We want to be careful to make sure that all types of high-quality providers are subject to the same standards and receive equitable funding without delay. Vermont does not need to fragment its early education system, it needs to fund all providers equally.