

Testimony to the House Education Committee on draft Pre K Legislation  
January 29, 2020

Thank you for inviting me to talk with you about Pre-k education in Vermont. I am the Early Childhood Coordinator for the Windham Southeast School District and Supervisory Union, which covers the towns of Brattleboro, Guilford, Dummerston, Putney, and Vernon. I coordinate our early childhood special education services, and our partnerships with private Pre-k programs. I am also available to our public Pre-k classrooms for coaching, resource support, and to navigate the morass of regulations, policies, and programs that govern early childhood education in our state.

I am in my 11<sup>th</sup> year with WSESU. Prior to that I worked as a consultant for the Child Development Division and the Head Start State Collaboration Office. Though I was not a policy maker, I was present for discussions about how high quality Pre-k could be publicly funded with education fund dollars, and how to identify the criteria that would define “high quality Pre-k”. People tried to distinguish between early childhood education programs that met the existing CDD regulations, we’ll call them “minimum quality”, and those that exceeded those regulations by offering a level of service that was equivalent to a public school education. The quality criteria you see in Act 166, and Act 62 before it, is a result of compromises made of those discussions: a licensed teacher endorsed in ECE or ECSE; STARS level 3, 4 or 5; curriculum that complies with Vermont Early Learning Standards; and ongoing progress monitoring using a state approved assessment system. While I support making the changes your committee has been wrestling with I hope you do not change this one thing: that UPK represents **higher standards and expectations** for early childhood education than exist in currently regulated early childhood programs in our state.

**Let me start by telling you what’s working well in WSESU**

- There are 312 preschoolers enrolled in UPK. We have seen an increase in our numbers each year since we began offering UPK.
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- We have 4 public classrooms serving children who are 4 by 9/1. All of these classrooms offer a full school day, far exceeding the ten hours that Act 166 calls for.

- We have 18 partnerships with private early childhood programs (17 centers including Head Start), and 1 home.
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- We have not limited our pre k region; we have partnerships in three other SUs (although the numbers are small).
- Families have choice. The multiple delivery model allows families to choose the kind of high quality early learning that suits their child and family needs—public school, private independent programs, preschools with a specific educational philosophy, part-day, full day-full year or school calendar schedule, and geographic locations that suit their needs
- For the most part, UPK has increased the quality of early education in the community because of the standards they must meet. We have more licensed early educators in our community thanks to these requirements. However, not all of the licensed teachers provide direct instruction to children. (more on that later)
- The tuition reduction for families is significant and allows more children to access pre k. Some children are able to access a ten hour a week program at no cost to families, but there are limited opportunities for this from the private providers in our region
- We have created a professional community of early childhood educators across public and private settings. We developed bridges between both sectors that have mutual benefit—our schools know more about the children entering kindergarten, and private programs feel elevated because of their partnership with the school district which offers them professional development, access to the local standards board for license renewal, and a voice at the table of school board meetings. Children and families need strong early childhood programs *and* strong elementary schools; and that starts with positive collegial relationships between teachers and administrative systems.

**Changes I support that would make UPK better; many of these are reflected in the draft legislation:**

- Decouple the administrative oversight of UPK and put it under the authority of the Agency of Education. Having two separate state agencies with regulatory oversight of UPK programs is confusing and inefficient. Obviously this must go hand in hand with sufficient capacity at the AOE to administer and monitor it.

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- Remove the requirement that public providers have to comply with Child Development Division licensing regulations. Public providers already have to comply with state and local school board policies and regulations. Start with a clean slate and then add any regulations that are critical to maintain health, safety, and early education quality for the benefit of children and families. The CDD regulations are a good place to start for health and safety standards, but the majority of the regulations are duplicative, unnecessary, or inefficient for school systems. It is burdensome and onerous for public providers to comply with the current regulations and leads to duplication of effort (e.g. professional development documentation, staff and student files, fingerprinting and background checks, associated staff requirements). Sometimes the regulations are in conflict with negotiated agreements with teacher or para educator contracts with regard to qualifications, professional learning, and scope of professional responsibilities. Release the public providers from having to comply with the CDD regulations.

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- The most significant factor in effective early education is the teacher, and teachers with professional credentials and specific knowledge and skills about teaching young children are more effective than those without equivalent credentials. Every child receiving public funding for pre k should be taught by a licensed teacher. Current legislation allows for private providers to have a licensed teacher onsite but not necessarily providing direct instruction. I appreciate all of the practical reasons we allow this, but wonder when we are going to apply teacher qualification standards across the board. Also, I urge you to consider allowing teachers with preschool Montessori certification to meet the teacher licensure requirements for UPK.
- We need clear guidelines and a process for universal monitoring. I understand this is under development and close to being finalized. I hope your committee hears from the AOE about this. My preference would be to

have an outside body do the monitoring rather than making the school district responsible for it—how can we be good partners if we are also the monitoring body?

- Ten hours of UPK a week isn't enough. Most children are in preschool at least 20 hours a week, and though I don't have research to back this up, ten hours a week isn't enough time to develop social emotional and early academic skills that lead to school readiness.

- The private partners want me to mention that there are administrative costs that they must bear in order to maintain the requirements for assessment and enrollment/attendance processes. They would like to be able to recoup those costs by keeping a percentage of the tuition. I appreciate that their costs are higher because of participating in Act 166 and support some way for this to happen.

### **My reactions to the draft legislation**

- Thank you for doing away with the term “prequalified provider”—it was confusing and unclear. (If you were “prequalified”, when would you become “qualified”?)

- I'm confused about the organizing structure: AOE is the single agency authority for UPK, but pre k through the private providers is governed by rules and monitored and evaluated by CDD? To me it makes sense for all UPK to be governed by the AOE since the funding comes from the education fund.

- RE: qualifications of the teacher—I've already shared my thoughts about all children needing to be taught by a licensed educator inside the classroom. If this resonates with the committee, please consider supporting statewide efforts to incentivize unlicensed early educators to become licensed teachers, and to raise their wages to be comparable to their public teacher counterparts. I am certain we will never have an equitable early childhood education system without equitable qualifications and compensation for our public and private early educators.

- Uniformity of forms and processes is welcomed and will satisfy the private providers who enroll children from multiple school districts.
- I notice that “tuition is at a statewide rate, which may be adjusted regionally”. Can you explain that?

Thank you for asking me to share my ideas with you. I am excited and hopeful about what will come out of this process.