

2019-20 Addison County UPreK

Addison County UPreK covers three school districts representing 17 towns that cover the majority of Addison County: Addison Central SD, Addison Northwest SD, and Mount Abraham USD. Our region currently serves about 430 children in PreK programming. Approximately 78% (338 children) of PreK children are served outside of school buildings in 29 community-based PreK programs, including center and home programs. The three districts hired a regional coordinator for Act 166 in the 2015-16 school year, when Mt Abraham USD (then Addison Northeast SU) became an “early adopter” of the law.

Strengths of UPreK:

- **Access:** Locally, Act 166 has increased PreK participation and the number of early childhood programs with a licensed early educator in the program at least 10 hours/week. In the year before Universal PreK was implemented, we served 228 children in our three districts with publicly-funded PreK; this school year it is approximately 430 children, an increase of 189%.
- **Quality:** The number of programs with a licensed early educator and quality ratings of 3 or more STARS has risen as a direct result of PreK. Since UPreK was established, at least nine local programs increased their STARS rating and/or newly hired or filled a vacancy with a licensed PreK teacher in order to contract for PreK. In our districts, we currently have 14 licensed community programs, 3 home-based programs, and 6 school-based programs that are prequalified.
- **Consistency:** Regional administration of Act 166 has led to greater consistency for PreK programs and schools. We developed one central contract, timeline, and attendance paperwork. Paperwork processes have also been relatively seamless for families as our schools have adopted a common application form and process for enrollment. Last year, coordinators from around the state began meeting to further align practices, processes, and paperwork.
- **Meeting family needs:** Families appreciate the portability of the tuition. In our region, families have a variety of PreK program choices that can match their schedule, location, and other needs. It allows for children who are in full-day, full-year programs to access the funding, and reduces the transitions for children and logistical complications for families connected to transportation to/from a part-time PreK program. We are consistently serving over 90% of our families within the county.
- **Information about children:** Basic demographic information and access to TS Gold data has improved information about children in the school budgeting and kindergarten transition process.
- **Increased public-private partnerships:** Regional administration has increased partnership and communication between schools and community early childhood programs. Kindergarten teachers and principals have access to information regarding PreK learning standards and child progress. Our region has also focused on child transitions to kindergarten, holding a PreK/K Transition Summit for all three districts and community programs and developing a shared Kindergarten Transition Form that is shared by PreK teachers with K teachers. Schools are also sharing information about kindergarten programs with PreK programs and parents.
- **Collaborative professional development:** More collaborative professional development opportunities are available for public and private early childhood educators. Regular evaluation of TS Gold child data has led to identification of county-wide trends in development and targeted professional development opportunities. For example, collaboration between school and

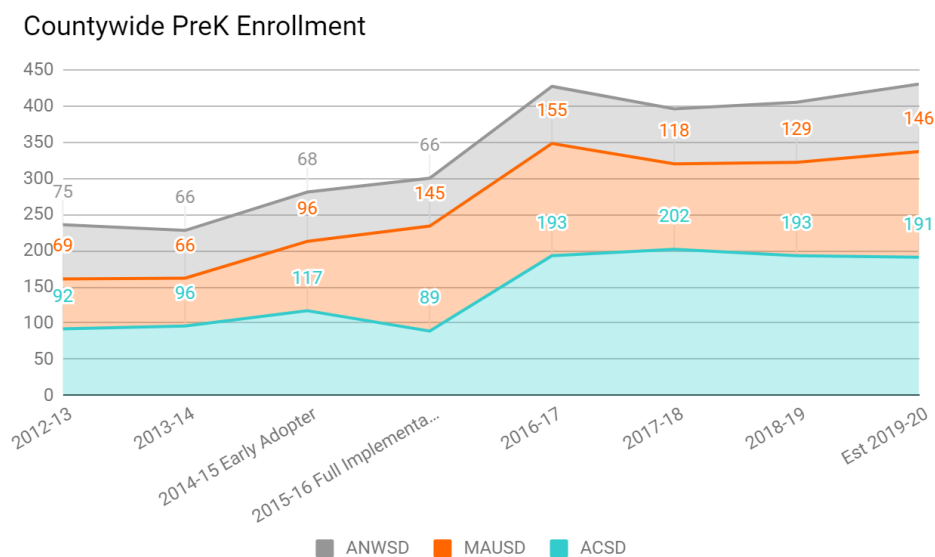
community early childhood programs, CIS, Building Bright Futures, and local mental health agencies around eMTSS and social-emotional development has led to the establishment of a public-private early childhood community of practice and ongoing support and trainings for public school and private program teachers. Collaborative curriculum groups and professional development have attracted home-based, school, and center programs.

- **Regional administration:** Regional administration of Act 166 has led to greater consistency for PreK programs and schools. Paperwork processes have been relatively seamless for families.

Limits of UPreK:

- **Capacity:** Families have very disparate needs for schedules, locations, and program characteristics, and it remains a challenge to fully meet those needs even when enough county “spaces” are available in PreK. Transportation is a barrier for some families. Finding mid-year openings for children (especially those at risk, e.g. those who are homeless, in custody) is a particular challenge. Neither school-based or community programs are able to address this need.
- **Special education portability:** The weakest area of Act 166 is the lack of portability for special education services. Districts do not have capacity to offer special services to children outside their district of residence, even if the child attends a PreK program out of district.
- **Equity:** Each PreK program, including public programs, has its own set of enrollment and waitlist procedures. It seems as though over the past several years, families have increasingly begun to self-segregate into specific programs, meaning more ‘at-risk’ students are being concentrated in individual programs. This would be something to research for additional data.
- **Dual administration:** Following two sets of regulations (CDD and AOE) is unwieldy for both community programs and school-based programs. It is often unclear exactly how school-aged policies may affect community PreK programs (i.e. McKinney-Vento, ELL services). Rapid implementation of state policies which do not consider local impact has led to last-minute scrambling and additional paperwork and costs.
- **Local administrative concerns:** Administrative costs to the program are high. Communication with multiple partners continues to be an issue. Processing paperwork is a challenge. Paperwork is often difficult to collect from programs. Tracking attendance and reconciling invoices for children who leave or unenroll is challenging. There is no recourse for schools when programs do not return paperwork in a timely way. Further, PreK providers that work with multiple school districts are challenged to track the many ways that different systems of paperwork, processes, and deadlines affect them. Schools are challenged to create new paperwork, processes, and deadlines with limited administrative capacity and guidance from the state.
- **Quality assurance:** Quality assurance for distant PreK community programs is a challenge. Also, when a program loses its licensed early educator or in some other way no longer qualifies for prequalification, all of the families who are receiving tuition funds are at risk of losing those moneys. This creates budgetary and ethical issues for families, schools, and PreK programs. Further, the AOE has not been monitoring PreK compliance with Act 166, so districts are responsible for ensuring PreK programs are in compliance themselves.
- **Lack of early educators:** There are insufficient numbers of licensed early educators to fully meet the demand created by PreK. No support is offered at a state level to obtain provisional licenses for early educators in community programs (as school districts can do).

- **Transparency:** Families do not understand the role of the public schools in their tuition payments and this can lead to confusion and frustration related to family payment responsibilities for extra hours beyond PreK or reenrollment when a family changes districts. Attendance at many PreK programs and school calendar years are not well matched and this adds to everyone’s confusion.
- **Regions:** The creation of “regions” by some districts has been confusing and frustrating for many programs and families. In our area, families affected by region decisions have not had information within the necessary time to be able to craft an appeal. In general, these families are paying out of pocket and/or the PreK programs are eating some or all of the cost for that child’s tuition.
- **Hours of PreK:** Most early childhood educators would agree that 10 hours/week is insufficient for children to make significant progress. Furthermore, a 10 hour/week program is a challenge for family schedules, particularly if there are working parents or if transportation is a challenge. A weighting and tuition system that promotes a minimum of 10 hours/week but rewards programs offering more would incentivize districts to offer full-time programming.
- **5 Year old children:** There has been significant disagreement about tuition payments for children who are age-eligible for kindergarten, but whose families, teachers, or IEP/504 Plan team decided to retain them in PreK. We need to create a variance process for retention of children who are deemed by a team (e.g. preschool teachers, parents, and local school representatives) to need additional PreK in a way that would be consistent with retention policies for other grades.
- **Requirements at the state level:** Statewide memos from lead agencies and changes in interpretation of the law have led to frustration and added costs at the local level. The criminal background check process is the most well-known of these challenges, but others include: memos related to PreK age-eligibility, requirements for additional data to be collected about Free and Reduced Lunch paperwork, and legislative conversations about potential changes. The requirements and changes have made PreK funding feel unstable for schools and programs alike. This has been exacerbated by staff changes at the Agency of Education; over the past five years, the Act 166 Coordinator position at the Agency has been filled by four different individuals with substantial periods of vacancy in between. These Coordinators have often been unable to answer questions from the field about specific criteria, meaning that districts have been left to interpret the law and create needed policies for themselves with little guidance or alignment.



Specific Questions and Comments Related to Draft Legislation:

Your committee has done an excellent job looking for compromise in the disputed sections of Act 166 and I appreciate the thought that has gone into crafting this bill.

- **PreK Eligibility & Monitoring:** It is unclear who is establishing and monitoring private program eligibility for partnership with districts. The bill seems to delegate some contracting and monitoring responsibilities to supervisory unions. However, it is unclear if this local monitoring is just for district programs or also applies to private programs. I'm also concerned that the districts will be responsible for monitoring under contracts that they are not able to write or modify themselves.
- **Uniform Forms & Processes:** The State Board of Ed and AOE will be responsible for developing "uniform forms and processes" including the contracts, invoices/payment schedules, enrollment, and attendance. I'm uncertain how this process will work in practice and especially concerned that districts will be in the position of enacting contracts without any ability to modify them to specific circumstances. Also, since there are not uniform enrollment or attendance forms and processes in the K-12 arena, it will be very challenging to integrate these statewide in the PreK world. For example, Burlington uses an online enrollment system through their student database; this is not a function that Addison County districts have pursued, in part due to differences in families' online access. While boilerplate language and common processes or requirements should be encouraged, local control will have to dictate how these processes are implemented within each district. This is where regional coordination can be of benefit.
- **Vermont Early Learning Standards:** The Vermont Early Learning Standards should be emphasized as the backbone on which curriculum and assessment tools in the public and private arenas should be based. The VELs were created with a broad group of public and private early childhood stakeholders and represent our state's best understanding of what children should know and be able to do at different ages, birth to third grade.
- **Child Progress Information:** Currently, child assessment data is accessible to districts electronically through the TS Gold system. The bill does not address whether the same assessment system or tools must be used by private and public agencies. Also, if AHS is taking charge of private programs will there be another way that districts can directly access child progress data?
- **Grievance Process:** Please clarify how separate grievances in the AOE/AHS will be resolved (e.g. if grievance is filed between private provider and district it seems as though the grievance would be directed to both agencies).
- **Ongoing Alignment of Systems:** Setting up two different systems for public/private early childhood programs will rely on ongoing alignment and agreement between the two. This has the potential to bifurcate the system in inequitable ways for families, staff, and programs. As we move forward, it will be incumbent upon the Agencies to demonstrate a willingness to coordinate and align the systems as much as possible.