

The Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators is committed to working in collaboration with other educational stakeholders and elected officials to further a number of legislative issues central to our core mission: ***Leadership for the education of all children, with a focus on children with disabilities.*** In addition to the legislative priorities outlined below, VCSEA is committed to informing the legislature regarding other critical Vermont education issues that may arise during the 2019 session, including (but not limited to) school safety, proficiency based learning, and licensing. In addition, VCSEA has a strong interest in being highly involved with the implementation of VT Act 173.

I. VCSEA Supports Access to High Quality Mental Health Supports for Children and Families

VCSEA supports an integrated service delivery system that emphasizes the essential collaboration between Mental Health, the Department for Children and Families (DCF), Education, and other key partners. Poverty, substance abuse, trauma, and toxic stress are well understood to have a severe impact on children and families, and therefore schools, and must be addressed at the policy level. Complex funding systems in Mental Health rely heavily on Medicaid and other funding streams that impact availability of service. As a result, the social and emotional needs of many students are not being addressed under the current system of care. Wait lists and the highly variable availability of mental health resources across Vermont dramatically impact students' readiness to learn and is related to the state's disproportionately high number of children identified as emotionally disturbed under special education and Section 504.

VCSEA supports state level collaborative leadership between the Agencies of Education and Human Services to support these necessary collaborative structures. Further, we support an overall examination of funding streams that provide mental health supports and the development of recommendations to address gaps in service availability.

II. VCSEA Supports Non-Discriminatory Access to High Quality Early Childhood Education

VCSEA supports and is committed to Act 166's goal of ensuring equitable and non-discriminatory access to high quality prekindergarten programming for all 3- and 4-year-old children, and specifically for children with disabilities. Under the current structure, however, children with disabilities and children from lower income families do not have equitable access to high quality programs. Lower income, working families often cannot afford to pay for hours beyond the 10 hours per week supported by public vouchers, resulting in limited access. Access is also limited for children with disabilities. LEA's are only required to provide special education services within the geographic boundary of their district, while tuition vouchers can be used outside of the district boundaries. This results in families being forced to forgo essential early intervention services or in families with children with disabilities being unable to exercise their right to Pre-K choice. In addition, a number of implementation issues remain problematic with Act 166, including joint oversight and administrative challenges. VCSEA recommends addressing the issues of equity inherent in Act 166 as well as implementation challenges.

III. VCSEA Believes that the Acceptance of Public Dollars Requires Private Entities to Abide by the Same Non-Discrimination Policies as their Public Counterparts

VCSEA understands Vermont's history of forging partnerships between public and private educational entities in order to support and expand opportunities for Vermont children. Schools in Vermont receiving public dollars should be held to the same non-discrimination policies as their public counterparts. Non-discrimination with respect to disability status is a fundamental civil right within our national and state educational frameworks. This protection should apply to any school or program in Vermont that is a recipient of public tuition dollars, including community-based Pre kindergarten programs and independent schools.