

# Otter Creek Child Center

"Celebrating 35 years of helping children discover their love for learning"

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To: Senate Education Committee  
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## Testimony on Vermont's Universal Pre-K Proposed Changes

LINDA JANUARY: Thank you for inviting us to speak with you today about Universal Pre-K, the impact it has had on Otter Creek Child Center, and how the proposed changes to Act 166 as laid out in S.10 might impact our program.

Otter Creek Child Center was founded in 1984 in Middlebury and serves children birth through five years of age. We are currently serving 50 children, 20 of whom are enrolled in our Prequalified Pre-K Program. We currently serve children from five different school districts and partner with four of the five districts in order to provide Universal Pre-K; all but one of the 20 children enrolled in our Pre-K program receives Pre-K funds. We are also supporting Sunshine Children's Center, by providing a licensed teacher for ten hours a week, in order for them to maintain their prequalified status.

We feel very fortunate to be a Universal Pre-K provider in Addison County. Long before Act 166, Addison Central School District, Addison Northwest School District, and Mount Abraham Unified School District supported Pre-K partnerships with local private providers. Early childhood education is strong in Addison County and is cared about deeply. When Act 166 came along, for many of us, it was business as usual with a few tweaks along the way. One of the biggest changes that came with Act 166 was the role of a regional Pre-K Coordinator, Meg Baker, to work with ACSD, ANWSD, MAUSD, and the private providers. Ms. Baker offered support to both the district offices and to private providers as we began to navigate the new system. Over the years, Ms. Baker has created centralized contracts, attendance forms, and invoicing at the regional level. She has created streamlined processes for the schools, the providers, and families. All three districts use the same enrollment form, the same contract for private providers, and the same attendance and invoicing processes. Ms. Baker has also provided a space and time for both public and private providers to come together and collaborate to improve outcomes for children and families. She has organized region-wide professional development and a region-wide Kindergarten Transition Conference at which Pre-K and Kindergarten teachers came together to adjust current practices to improve transitions for children. The Addison County Regional Pre-K Coordinator model is a shining example of how Act 166 is working and making strides to improve outcomes. It is a model that we urge the committee to learn more about in order to get a wider picture of how Act 166 is playing out across Vermont.

The idea of centralizing administration functions of Pre-K is very appealing. One contract, one attendance system, and one invoice system would make our lives as administrators so much easier! However, despite the daydream of a streamlined system, we can't help but be concerned.

The current proposal for centralizing the functions of Pre-K at the state level will, in fact, harm Addison County Prequalified Pre-K providers by eliminating the need for our regional coordinator. We will no longer have the extra support of navigating the system, nor will we have an advocate for families when the system becomes overwhelming, nor close collaboration with the public schools, or access to space and time dedicated to reflect, grow, and learn together as Pre-K providers.

The sheer amount of resources and time that will be required to create the centralized system is concerning when S.10 calls for the proposed changes to take effect on passage. Will adequate time be given for the Agency of

Education to create, test, and modify a system before implementing changes state-wide? The capacity of the Agency of Education to create and administer new systems is also concerning. There is not enough capacity within the current Early Childhood Team at the AOE to take on such a massive undertaking. Frankly, there is not enough capacity within the whole of the Agency of Education to take on this charge. One of the current teachers in our Otter Creek program submitted her Peer Review portfolio in May 2018 and is still waiting for her scheduled interview – nearly nine months later. It has been our experience that communication with the AOE leaves much to be desired, which leaves little faith in the agency’s ability to create, implement, and monitor a state-wide centralized Pre-K system.

Moving Universal Pre-K to be fully under the Agency of Education and to cut ties with the Agency of Human Services in the administration and monitoring efforts is troubling for the following reasons:

- The capacity of the Agency of Education to fully monitor the system moving forward;
- These changes will most certainly create a deeper divide in the Early Childhood world between the Agency of Education and the Child Development Division, will create a competitive environment for resources, will create confusion for private providers with multiple sets of rules and regulations, and will model at the state level a siloed, non-collaborative system;
- These changes would create two sets of health and safety regulations;
- There would be a public system outside of the Quality Rating System – STARS – which is an established system that measures the quality of programs and helps parents to find high-quality programming;
- It will be more difficult for families to search for and research Pre-K programs as they are making decisions on which program is best for their child and family. Currently, because all private and public programs are in the same system, families are able to go to one convenient location to search for programs which provides contact information, yearly scheduling information, and information regarding any health and safety violations.

That being said, we are pleased to see in S.10 that the elimination of regions is taking place. The one child in our program at Otter Creek who currently does not receive Pre-K funding lives in a district that has created a region that excludes Otter Creek. This family has been at Otter Creek for the past five years and is in its final year in our program, and Mom was so excited for her daughter to spend her last year with the close friends that she has grown with since she was an infant. Unfortunately – because her home district won’t partner with Otter Creek and because the amount of state tuition assistance that the family receives decreased – Mom had to make the hard decision to dual-enroll her daughter. Now, however, they have no choice but to attend Otter Creek just three days a week – Monday, Wednesday, and Friday – and to attend a home-district-based program on Tuesday and Thursday. Because of this, the family is forced to juggle tuition payments through a confusing combination of scholarship funds, child care financial assistance funds, and Pre-K funds. Worse yet, the child has a disruptive, inconsistent schedule in what should have been a strong, transitional school year. Without these arbitrary regional boundaries, this family would have been able to attend Otter Creek full-time, which would better meet the needs of both the child and the family. Having the ability to have your child in a program of your choosing reduces the stress level on families and greatly improves the experience for the child.

I’d now like to introduce my Assistant Director, Cookie Danyow to talk to you about her experience as a previous home-based Pre-K and child care provider and some of her additional comments about the proposal outlined in S. 10.

**COOKIE DANYOW:** Hello, and thank you again for having us today. I want to start off by telling you a bit about my story in early childhood education. For the past 30 years I have worked in early childhood education in many different roles, both within center-based programs and within my home in Addison County. I was hired as the Assistant Director at Otter Creek Child Center in Middlebury last August; previously I was operating a registered family child care program from my home.

Mountain Road Preschool – my home program – was small, but it made a significant impact in my community as the only registered child care and preschool program in the town of Addison. My program was unique as a nature-based early education program serving children age eight weeks to six years. It was a 5-STAR program and a prequalified Pre-K education program, I was (and still am) a licensed teacher, and I had the first and only certified outdoor classroom in the state of Vermont.

In the six years of operating my program, I was able to finish my Bachelor's Degree and obtain my early childhood provisional teaching license to become a prequalified preschool program. In 2017, I was one of the 50 educators in the state to receive my Early Childhood Teaching license through the partnership between Let's Grow Kids (then Vermont Birth to Five) and the Vermont Agency of Education through the Peer Review Program. I was operating a very successful program, and I'm proud to say that both I and the program received awards and recognition in the early childhood field at both the state and national levels. However, I made the difficult decision to close my program in August 2018 to meet the needs of my family, which included having my 86-year-old father move into my home.

Prior to operating my home program, I worked in several capacities in education including early childhood, both in home-based and center-based programs. Unfortunately, through my years in education, I have had many encounters with the childcare crisis and the lack of capacity for our young children. I have experienced in both types of programs that families are often in desperate need for not only infant spots, but also for the 10 hours of state-funded preschool – which has been very hard to obtain in Addison County. When Mountain Road Preschool closed in August 2018, I had 44 children on my wait-list including six children that had not been born yet and currently at Otter Creek we have over 30 children on our waitlist, who have not been born and over 100 between the ages of 6 weeks to 3 years old.

With Act 166 there are many things that went well, but also some things that I feel needed more attention. One challenge as a family provider was the duplication of administrative paperwork; last year I had to be fingerprinted three times – once for the Child Development Division for being a registered home provider, once for my Vermont teaching license, and once for being a prequalified Preschool program through the State of Vermont. Fortunately, being a Pre-K program in Addison County, I was mentored successfully through all aspects of the requirements with the support of Meg Baker as Addison County's Universal Pre-K Coordinator, and I feel that her position is crucial to the success of navigating all of the support pieces needed at the local level. It is my opinion that having only the Agency of Education support this – without focused local help – would lead to a significant negative impact upon the success of the program.

In conclusion, we encourage this committee to:

- Maintain joint administration by the Agency of Human Services and the Agency of Education and the essential support of regional Pre-K coordinators;
- Continue to champion the portability of the program so that families are able to use the program that works best for their child;
- Continue to maintain the current quality and health and safety standards for both private and public Pre-K programs; and
- Continue to support early educators in advancing their credentials in order to meet demand throughout the state.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important issue.