



Date: September 1, 2020

To: Senator Phil Baruth, Chair
Senate Education Committee

From: Aly Richards, CEO

Re: COVID-19 Impacts on Universal Pre-K

Thank you for the opportunity to join the committee's discussion on emerging concerns related to Vermont's universal prekindergarten program in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an important discussion, and one that we as a state are only starting to fully understand as schools prepare to reopen for the academic year.

I want to start by acknowledging the incredible work that early educators working in pre-K programs around the state did this spring to navigate remote learning and support families. We saw truly inspiring examples of early educators rising to the occasion and implementing innovative supports and educational opportunities for children and families. It really affirmed the critically important role that early educators play in our educational system and in the lives of Vermont families.

Now, as early care and education programs around the state have largely reopened and we all prepare for the start of the academic year, we are hearing huge concerns from the field related to hiring and retention of staff across the board for early childhood programs, and an especially acute shortage of licensed teachers in pre-K programs. Data collected by the Child Development Division in July highlighted these challenges, which have only been exacerbated since. The CDD survey found that about 60 regulated child care programs at the time had changed their hours or days of operation because of COVID-19, specifically because they didn't have enough staff to operate at full hours. Additionally, we have heard in the past two months from programs serving 500 children in Chittenden County alone that have closed or are about to close due in large part to staffing challenges. We hear every day from programs that are desperate to hire staff and keep those they have.

In order to address this shortage and make sure that 3- and 4-year-olds in Vermont continue to have access to high-quality early education opportunities during the pandemic, we support the idea of providing waivers for prequalified universal pre-K programs who lose their licensed teachers and are unable to hire replacements in a timely fashion. We appreciate that AOE has shifted policy to allow requests for additional days for substitutes for licensed teachers; programs are now allowed to apply for an additional 45 days. We also recommend allowing programs that were prequalified as of September 1, 2020 to receive a waiver to utilize a substitute for the duration of the academic year. To be clear, this should be a temporary solution in these unprecedented times, but is not a long-term solution to pre-K staffing challenges.

Due to underfunding in the system, private programs have historically low rates of pay and are rarely able to offer health insurance benefits, making it very difficult to hire and retain staff, especially during a public health emergency. In accordance with Vermont's health guidelines for child care during the pandemic, many teachers with underlying circumstances that put them at high risk due to age or health conditions are unavailable. Historically, retired teachers are a primary resource for some private programs who contract licensed teachers to support their universal pre-K programs. In a recent meeting with Act 166 coordinators in Chittenden County, we also heard of school-based programs struggling to hire licensed early educators for their programs, which makes the pool of potential hires even smaller. We have also heard from school districts with waiting lists for their prekindergarten programs and we worry that any loss of capacity in UPK decreases opportunities for access.

It is important to remember that if a program loses their prequalification status due to inability to recruit a licensed teacher, the families enrolled in that program may lose access to Act 166 tuition support and therefore lose access to prekindergarten altogether. During an economic crisis, losing access to any financial support can be devastating for families.

In this incredibly difficult time we should be expanding access to high-quality early learning environments, not limiting supports for our youngest children.