

9/1/2020 Senate Education Testimony
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify to the impacts of Covid on PreK programs. This school year, our three districts are partnering with 31 private PreK programs to offer PreK to our resident children. Last year about 80% of our roughly 430 PreK children were served in private PreK programs; I anticipate a similar figure this school year.

As you know, Covid has brought changes to both public and private PreK programming. Programs of all types have greater shifts in fall enrollment as families decide on their needs and comfort levels with sending children into group environments. In practice, this means that fewer children seem to be enrolled in PreK this fall. While enrollment numbers are not yet complete, I estimate that we will have at least 20-25% fewer PreK children enrolled this school year than last year. Countywide, I have had at least 34 children withdraw from PreK entirely in the last couple of months and that only includes children who have withdrawn, not the three year-olds that never enrolled to begin with. Programs that typically have lengthy waitlists have, for the first time, spaces available.

Both districts and private programs are experiencing a shortage of staff who are able and willing to come back. Barriers for staff include personal and household health and safety concerns and child care for their own children. Schools and private programs have concerns about substitutes and staffing that may lead to temporary, isolated classroom closures. That said, our local private programs have been creative in their staffing. Many are allowing staff children to come to work with their parents or offering more flexible scheduling. For example, one program is reducing hours for a teacher and others are planning for more remote hours for teachers. I am not currently seeing a high level of concerns with regard to retaining licensed teachers in local programs.

I am aware that some private programs around the state have closed, including a few of our former partner programs, such as University of Vermont Campus Children's School and Kinderstart. Financially, private programs, who have always operated on shoe-string budgets, are struggling with drops in enrollment, increased supply needs, costs of communication tools to meet with staff and families, and changes to space (e.g. renovations to accommodate health checks and greater space for children, equipment needed to move learning outdoors, changes in furniture). Full-time program hours are also reduced for children due to health and safety guidance and the extra time needed for staff to clean adequately. While grants have become available to support some of these costs, the staff time and energy required to write the grants has meant that not all programs have been able to receive them. PreK funding has been a boon to the programs financially as one area they can rely upon.

Our district PreK programs plan to offer at least 10 hours of in-person learning for PreK students in a hybrid or 100% remote model. Most of our private PreK programs will be fully in-person this fall. A few private programs are also offering families a 100% remote option, mostly in individual

situations where families have a medical concern that does not allow the child to safely return. Our districts have offered professional development about remote learning to our private partners and we fully anticipate that if programs need to close, they will continue to offer remote PreK to their families. Indeed, even in the spring when it was not required, our PreK programs formed excellent remote learning partnerships with families to provide them with the educational, physical and community supports that they needed, delivering and mailing supplies to families as well as offering virtual learning.

In summary, while our private PreK programs have been challenged, most have risen to the occasion to serve families and children. I have confidence that the early childhood education field is creative and will serve families as best as they can.