

## Windsor Central Supervisory Union Early Education Experience

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to testify about S.56 related to early childhood care and education. I am Sherry Sousa, Superintendent of Windsor Central Supervisory Union. We are a district of seven communities including Barnard, Bridgewater, Killington, Pittsfield, Pomfret, Reading and Woodstock, and just over 1000 students.

The evidence is clear: high-quality PreK can have profound effects on pre-academic skills, overall educational outcomes, and cognitive abilities. Programming that teaches and nurtures our youngest students' executive functioning skills, self-regulation strategies, oral language, listening comprehension, and knowledge of the world is a powerful tool Vermont can leverage to promote equity and educational achievement for all our students.

In 2018, WCSU was one of the first districts to offer full time public Pre K for 3 and 4 year olds. We began with one Pre K classroom at four elementary schools. Currently, WCSU has nine Pre K classrooms across four elementary schools - all with licensed Pre K teachers and program assistants. We were concerned about the impact on our communities' private early education programs however not one of our private programs closed. Instead, they now offer birth to age 3 programs, as well as classrooms for older Pre K students whose parents desire a part time nursery school model. In fact, two programs in Woodstock have expanded their offerings in the time since our PreK opened, and a new private childcare center for birth to three also opened.

For our early childhood special education (ECSE) students, we observed that they now have greater consistency in their programming because they have access to licensed teachers supervised by licensed school administrators. This ensures quality of programming for our most intensive needs students while not having to increase ECSE staff. They have greater access to speech, OT and PT that takes place within their schools. In addition, there are smoother transitions between PreK and kindergarten due to the ability of educators to collaborate within the building prior to the student entering that grade.

In implementing our commitment to public Pre K programming, we noted that transportation has not been an issue as all parents transport their children and these classrooms are within their home communities. With regards to the length of the day, Pre K after school programs are offered either at the schools or in partnership with private Pre K Programs. The school day start is consistent with other elementary aged students so is not a challenge for parents.

From the decision to open Pre K classrooms to program readiness, the planning and preparation occurred over six months. All of our programs received initial STARs approval. Classrooms were prepared over the summer. Much of the infrastructure was in place as schools are designed for young learners. Elementary School Administrators are trained and experienced in addressing the unique developmental needs of all early education aged students. Licensed Pre K teachers worked with administrators to develop age appropriate programming.

WCSU's investment in offering Pre K programs has had many positive outcomes. We are able to promote a strong foundation of early literacy and math skills. Other outcomes include greater continuity of curriculum. Pre K educators follow the same instructional practices as our elementary teachers including the All Learners Network for mathematics, Foundations for early literacy, and Second Step materials for SEL. This instruction begins with our 3 year olds and continues through all their elementary grades. Further, children in our programs enter kindergarten having had time to learn the routines, practices and culture of the public school system. Further, our Prek teachers have access to district wide training, collaboration, and supervision from licensed administrators, curriculum coordinators, and instructional coaches including PreK LETRS, math strategies, and social/emotional skills. Public school teachers have funding, time and the expectation to access higher quality training that directly impacts student outcomes. Public Pre K teachers have direct access to specialists in the school and within the district. This means earlier opportunities to consult and get feedback around student concerns, to obtain guidance when creating targeted Tier 2 interventions, and access to help in identification of the needs for special education support.

Importantly, Pre K teachers set the tone for parent engagement expectations and create a culture of partnership and collaboration between home and public school. This cannot be emphasized enough. Strong relationships between parents and educators provide the framework for a families educational experience throughout their child's time in school. The sooner we can build that commitment, the better.

Creating high quality public preschool programs is costly. Each classroom greater than 10 students requires a licensed educator and a trained paraprofessional. In addition, classrooms and bathrooms must be adapted to the unique needs and size of younger students. While the communities of WCSU have willingly supported these classes financially knowing the long term benefits, that is not the option for other districts.

I want to end my testimony where I began. WCSU believes that families' access to free high quality early education is an equity issue. Quality Pre K should not be available only to those who can afford it. Our district wants all our kindergarten students to enter their classroom having a strong foundation in early language and math skills, an understanding

of the daily expectations of our schools, and for their families to have trust in our educators. Providing full funding for 4 year old students will allow our district to continue to offer these resources to all of our youngest students and will ensure that other districts will have the opportunity to offer similar quality programming. I appreciate your time and consideration of this request.