

House Human Services Committee Testimony

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Public PreK in Southwest Vermont SU

SY 22-23: 348 currently enrolled 3-5 year old children in the SVSU.

- SVUESD and North Bennington (306 students) - 83% are in private UPK programs.
- Arlington/Sandgate (42 students) - 88% are served in a public school based program at Fisher Elementary.
- 29% of SVSU PreK students are receiving IEP services.
- Of the 110 students, $\frac{1}{3}$ would be considered Children with Complex Needs (CCN)
- ECSE services are carried out in all settings and support inclusion.



Southwest VT SU includes the towns of Bennington, Pownal, Woodford, Shaftsbury, North Bennington, Arlington and Sandgate.

Across the SVSU we have a 77% rate of students receiving Free/Reduced Lunch according to 2023 AOE report.

Inclusion in Early Childhood Settings

- Vermont has always been a state which supports maximizing inclusion at all grade levels.

- Inclusion - Access, Participation and Supports (NAEYC and DEC)
 - Create high expectations for each child to reach full potential
 - Develop a program philosophy on inclusion
 - Establish a system of services and supports
 - Revise program and professional standards
 - Achieve and integrated professional development system
 - Influence federal and state accountability systems



DEC/NAEYC. (2009). *Early childhood inclusion: A joint position statement of the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) and National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute.

The position statement defines inclusion as a triad of access, participation and supports. Access is the first step in supporting inclusion. All individuals need to get through the door before we can be inclusive. Participation refers to an individual not just being there, but being a part of what is happening in the classroom. Both access and participation cannot happen without adequate supports. Supports need to be defined. Supports can be along a continuum, starting with changes to the environment, changes to the schedule/logistics, changes to the curriculum and/or expectations, offering the support of peers and then finally offering the support of adults. Supports are not always additional adults, but require intentionality and planning.

Recommendations

1. We already have the VELs, this creates a standard of expectations for all children
2. Programs need to come to this philosophy on their own, but typically ECE settings desire to be inclusive.
3. Local and state agencies need to help support and establish these systems. There should be equity across settings in providing these supports
4. ECE has recommendations for this from NAEYC's Unifying Framework, the philosophy which is guiding our state's approach to professionalizing our workforce.
5. Professional learning and quality improvement need to be centralized under one system to support all ECE. All professionals should have the same access to a wide array of aligned and appropriate PD.

1. State legislation has the ability to influence this, but additionally requires one system for all of ECE.

Supports for Inclusion

- Children in private PreK settings do not always have as much access to supports.
- The SVSU is implementing a district wide Early MTSS framework to align all supports across all public PreK settings.
- Over 50 children have been referred to Early Childhood EST in 2022-23 school year.
- Of these referrals 23 children were referred to ECSE evaluation, many stayed in EST and 5 have been moved to 504 eligibility.
- Referrals include need in communication, adaptive skills and social emotional/behavioral needs.



There are many barriers which limit access to support. Some of these are structural and many of these are due to a lack of resources. In the SVSU we have been working to try to bring as many supports as possible to all PreK children regardless of setting. This is parallel to the MTSS systems that are required in all K-12 education settings. We are also participating with the Agency of Education as a pilot site of the Early MTSS framework they are supporting. This has been helpful in establishing a SVSU wide Early MTSS framework.

What supports are missing?

- Additional staffing in private settings.
 - SAG grant (section 14 of S.56) is often the source of funding for this, increasing SAG funding and reforming the application process is critical.
 - Access to private ABA services through medical model.
- Access to consultation.
 - Programs need access to trained professionals in order to determine interventions which may support children in the classroom.
- Time for staff collaboration and planning.
 - Removing barriers to access requires extensive planning and consideration.
 - Private programs do not often have the staffing or schedules to allow teachers to do this work.



I mentioned in a previous slide what inclusion supports can look like. In many cases structural changes can help make improvements, but in many cases solving immediate challenges requires adult intervention. SAG (Special Accommodations Grant) has become the primary resource for these supports in private early childhood programs. SAG funding needs to be increased and access to these grants cannot be limited to a strict timeline. Programs cannot currently manage the timelines and application process of the existing grant. Many communities have access to often for profit ABA (applied behavior analysis) companies. These companies serve children, primarily on the autism spectrum, through a medical insurance model. ABA therapy is generally recommended for these students and often companies/organizations will see children in childcare/PreK settings and collaborate with program staff. This is a support that can be incredibly beneficial to many children and families, but adds another layer to the care landscape and the child's support team. These services need to be managed and programs need to be able to form appropriate relationships with the professionals operating in their program.

For every adult service or support that can be offered, ECSE principals always recommend support for embedded learning. This means that the primary caregiver/teacher needs to be a part of the services provided and be able to help support carryover in the child's naturalistic environment. Consultation can be provided by ECSE staff, but this requires program staff to be available for this time. Often program staff cannot get coverage to do this planning during the work day. Additionally fully supporting inclusion requires extensive planning and intentionality.

Professional Recognition

- VTAEYC and *Advancing Early Childhood as a Profession*
- Well trained, well compensated workforce
- Increased public investment in S.56 helps provide the funding for changes compensation.
- Aligned professional competencies and a state supported licensure system of ECE professionals will ensure a standard of accountability.



The work of VTAEYC to promote the establishing of ECE as a recognized profession is critical to moving the needle for all ECE systems. There is a dependent relationship between establishing the profession and providing adequate compensation which aligns with that of similarly trained education professionals. The Advancing Taskforce is also working on creating a pathway to a licensure system including a bridge which would help those in the field remain. The other piece of this work is taking the established competencies of an ECE at each level and creating a robust professional learning system which supports all levels of professionals up to and including access to higher education.

Importance of Governance Change

Systems analysis report as mandated by Act 45 identified a need to make changes to the current governance of early childhood education.

- Section 16 of S.56 addresses this need by requiring the Department of Children and Families to evaluate possible changes and implementation.
- Agency of Education should also be asked to put significant consideration into their oversight of Early Childhood Education.
- PreK study committee work must align with work in Section 16 to create a comprehensive ECE system.



The extensive systems analysis report mandated in Act 45 clearly identified the bifurcated governance in ECE as a barrier to system change. The current pieces of S.56 continue to separate the Agency of Education and the Agency of Human services. They set up a system in which PreK becomes solely an “education” responsibility and DCF is being asked to “give up what they can” but still carry out essential practices of the system. The language of the bill continues to pit the two agencies against each other instead of taking this as an opportunity to create one cohesive system which can implement and support the type of change and accountability which ECE needs.

There are numerous initiatives being launched which can help to support program improvement and accountability. I worry about the lack of alignment between all of these systems, conflicting interested and a general lack of efficiency due to the bifurcated ECE landscape. We are doing all of our educators a disservice by not creating this alignment.

Shared Accountability System



This graphic of shared accountability is from the NAEYC Unifying Framework.

“As a profession, we welcome increased, clear, and consistent accountability tied to our definitions of professional competencies and resulting in increased compensation. We understand that we can only expect the significant increases in public financing that are needed to move the profession forward if we are willing to be accountable for their effective use. We also understand that we can only be held accountable if we have the necessary and sufficient supports, resources, and infrastructure. These supports, resources, infrastructure, and accountability are interrelated and interdependent and operate within a broad system of professional preparation programs, employers/owners, professional organizations and governance bodies, and state and federal governments and agencies.”

S.56 has provisions to drive significant public funding, through expansion of CCFAP as well as potential for expanding public PreK. By strengthening the language around supporting professional accountability and providing adequate supports and resources to programs we can meet this shared accountability model. Pieces of S.56 like the ability to make necessary governance changes as well as direct supports for inclusion are critical to developing shared accountability.

What is next?

- I encourage the committee to see this legislation as a way to make significant structural change to an area of education and development that Vermonters have already shown value to.
- Vermont is positioned to not only make significant changes here but provide examples for significant changes on the national level.
- We have a dedicated and passionate group of professionals already supporting this field. We need to do what we can to not only support those in the field but to recruit new professionals to join ECE.

