

Testimony for the Senate Education Committee

Tuesday February 14, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story with you today.

My name is Alyson Grzyb. I have worked in the field of early childhood education for over 25 years. I have a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Education and I hold a Vermont Level II Teaching License, ages birth through six. I am currently the Director of the Bennington Early Childhood Center in Bennington, VT. We are a pre-qualified pre-k partner site through the Agency of Education and a 5 STARS quality early childhood education program through the Child Development Division of the Agency of Human Services. We partner with both the Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union and the Bennington Rutland Supervisory Union. We serve 70 children from our community. This year, we receive universal pre-k funds for 39 of those 70 students. 23 of those students are 4-year-olds and 16 are 3-year-olds. We have been partnering with school districts to offer public pre-k since 2008. Our program is open 7:30-5:00 each day, with options to attend as few as three mornings and as much as five full days. We run on a school year schedule but offer camps on school vacations and during the summer months to support families that need year-round care. Our high-quality program is sought after by many families in our area, including those that work for Bennington College and Southwest Vermont Medical Center. Our program is very child and family centered, offering a variety of hands-on learning experiences and the introduction of the scientific method to encourage our students to become independent thinkers and instill a lifelong love of learning. Currently, our pre-k students are studying the properties of matter, creating their own stories, and mastering 300-piece jigsaw puzzles, to name a few. They are going home and sharing their knowledge with family members and are excited and eager to come to school each day.

I am here today to talk about how universal pre-k has impacted our program as a business as well as how it benefits our families. Universal pre-k funds help to keep our program afloat financially. This financial benefit comes about in a couple of different ways. First, the State's rate per hour for pre-k is higher than what we had previously charged which has allowed us to increase our rate for preschoolers and subsequently pay our teachers a little bit more (which still isn't enough for the work that they do). Secondly, families who start at our program as one or two year olds very often increase the number of days or number of hours they attend our program once they reach the age of 3 when the state covers 10 hours per week of their tuition. For example, many families will send their child just 3 mornings and then increase to 3 full days or 4 to 5 mornings once they reach universal pre-k eligibility. Being a pre-k partner site is not only financially advantageous for us but it also provides us with a network of other pre-k partner programs to bounce ideas off of as well as provides us with professional development opportunities through the supervisory unions that are often of greater quality and certainly of greater cost than we would be able to afford to provide for our staff. Over the past 15 years we have built strong relationships with our local supervisory unions. We work closely with them to provide special education services to our students and to work to make the transition to kindergarten as smooth as possible.

In our current mixed delivery system of universal pre-k parents have options to best meet the needs of their families. Some families need year-round care, some families need full day care, some families do not need care but want the social and academic benefits of a high quality pre-k program. High quality programs can be found in elementary schools, in private licensed programs, and in family child care home programs. I do believe some changes should be made to the current universal pre-k program, such as increasing hours of the current system beyond 10 hours and greater consistency in hours offered between public school and private partner programs, but I do not believe 3-year olds should be removed from the universal pre-k program,

and I do not believe that families' options should be limited to just public schools. We need to do what is best for the children in our state and supporting high quality programs that are getting the job done successfully and supporting families to make the best choices for their personal situations would do just that.

Some may say that if 4-year olds move out of private early childhood education programs then they would have more room for infants and toddlers, but the situation is not as simple as that. Would there be more physical space, yes, but would that space be appropriate for infants and toddlers, not necessarily. The ratios of children to staff for infants is capped at 4:1 and toddlers at 5:1, whereas the ratio for preschool students is capped at 10:1, which means that infants and toddlers need more staff per group of children. Our current regulations also limit the number of infants in one room to 8, and toddlers to 10, whereas you can have up to 20 preschoolers in one room. If we try to turn spaces that once held 15-20 preschoolers into infant or toddler rooms then we will either have to put large amounts of money into reconstructing our rooms so that the center can still accept as many students as it did before or run our programs with fewer children. Both options would be financially damaging to programs. I know part of the intent of S.56 is to increase child care capacity and support the financial viability of child care programs, however I fear that this proposed change to the universal pre-k program would have the opposite effect.

As you are working through this long awaited, much needed child care bill I urge you to consider how changes to the current system could adversely affect both families' abilities to meet their needs and programs' abilities to effectively operate. It is not an easy task to overhaul our current childcare system in a way that will make early childhood education both affordable and accessible to all families and fairly compensate and support early childhood educators. I hope that listening to stories like mine will help you to make informed decisions.