

2/15/23

Legislative Testimony to Senate Education Committee

Dear Education Committee Members,

Good morning and thank you for inviting me to speak about S.56 related to early childhood care and education. My name is Meg Baker and I have been the Universal PreK Coordinator for the Addison Central, Addison Northwest, and Mount Abraham Unified School Districts for the past 8 years - since the inception of Act 166 for early adopters. I have been in the early childhood field in Vermont for over 20 years and hold a Masters in Early Childhood Education.

My focus today is on the UPreK portions of S.56, although I am happy to address some of the other impacts on the early childhood system. I want to begin today with thanks for your dedication to children, families, schools, and preschool programming. The system is complex, and I appreciate your attempts to understand it and to effect change for the children and families of Vermont.

Agreeing on the *purpose* of early childhood education is the first step in creating a coherent and unified system of governance and funding. The benefits of early childhood education to young children are well documented. The core philosophy that has guided my work with Universal PreK is that all children and families deserve access to early childhood education, all children and families should have supports in their early childhood programs, and that all programs and staff should be supported to deliver quality instruction. Access, supports, and quality for all children are what we expect from our public education systems and we should prioritize those concepts for our youngest children as well.

We must also consider the unique developmental needs of young children. Child care and early childhood education are inextricably linked to one another. High quality early childhood programming is not just a pre-KINDERGARTEN experience; it is a holistic, family-centered approach tailored to the unique needs of this age group. Preschoolers straddle a developmental shift between the individually responsive, nurturing care that is needed by infants and toddlers and the academic knowledge and greater independence we expect from school-aged children.

I would like to explicitly address a few points about preschool access and supports in S.56:

- Moving preschool for 4 year-olds into elementary schools (especially with transportation) may make it easier for some families to access preschool, BUT working families will have more difficulty with accessing school-day/year preschool without before/after school and summer care. Simply designing after school and summer programs for younger children is not developmentally appropriate as it creates additional transitions and disrupts continuity of care. This supports the concept of a mixed delivery system that can meet the needs of all children and families.
- As noted by others, current community preschool programs are likely to close if they lose most 4 year-olds - they are unlikely to transition to serving younger children. This would in turn decrease capacity for all children. This is a reason to maintain the mixed delivery system.
- Access for all 3 year olds to inclusive classrooms will be reduced by the age group removal from UPreK and ADM unless they have disabilities. This means 3 year-olds with disabilities who are enrolled in school programs will not be with their same-age peers. The bill should maintain *at least* current levels of access for all 3 year-olds.

- Although CCFAP subsidies will serve more families based on changes to eligibility, they will not provide universal access to early care and education in the way that UPreK funds currently do. Families who qualify for full CCFAP may be less likely to move their children to the public school classrooms if hours/location are not convenient - meaning low-income families may be concentrated in private programs while upper income families who were priced out of private programs would attend district programs.
- Inclusionary supports for preschoolers with disabilities and mental health needs is a critical need in the system. The Special Accommodation Grants (SAG) provide private programs with resources to make accommodations or modifications for children with disabilities in their early childhood programs. These supports may include additional staff to provide individualized supports or specialized equipment to meet children's individual needs. However, SAG grants have low caps on equipment costs, short timelines for hiring staff, and a frequent reapplication process. S.56 creates a study of the SAG program that would more effectively support private programs to access supports for children with disabilities, but these supports will not be immediately available and there is no guarantee that they will be able to provide adequate supports for children with disabilities in private early childhood programs.
- Non-citizens will have increased access to preschool programming as a result of changes to CCFAP. Non-citizen children often experience multiple barriers to accessing and succeeding in early education programs, including cost, language, poverty, and transportation barriers. Non-citizen children already enroll in our K-12 schools and are disadvantaged when they are excluded from high quality early childhood programs. Increasing access to early education programs for this population is a strength of the bill.

Obviously, increasing the *quality* of early care and education is a primary goal of our interest in this field. We all want what is best for young children and their families. Fortunately, we have research on brain development and best practices in quality care and education that can help to guide us.

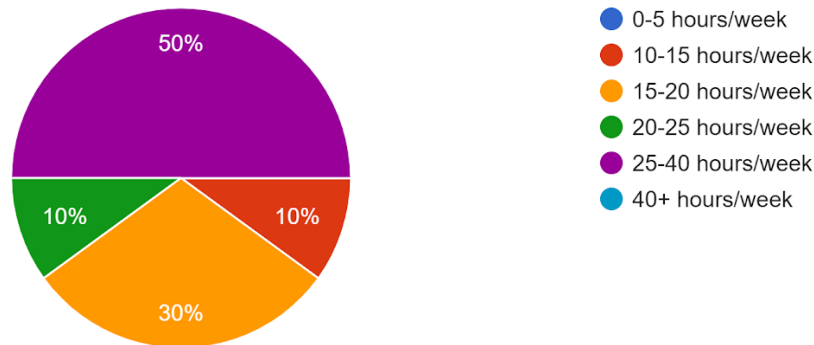
- This model will require a substantial number of new ECE/ECSE licensed teachers and administrators with ECE expertise. Although the early childhood field is rich with individuals who have expertise with this age group, many are not currently certified as educators - because few formal programs exist for ECE licensure, because the paperwork and expense of licensure is onerous, and because there have not historically been any incentives to achieving this licensure.
- In order to open more preschool classrooms, school districts would need more time, administrative expertise, and significant start-up and ongoing funding than provided by the current bill.
  - School districts have little experience with the unique developmental needs of preschoolers who require more supervision and health and safety precautions than older children, more holistic learning through play and routines, and greater family communications and supports than most older children. As I note above, early childhood education is specifically designed to meet the unique developmental needs of young children. Without denigrating the public education system's expertise in school-age pedagogy, there would be a substantial learning curve and investment needed for districts to fully implement high quality early education programs for all children that meet their developmental needs. NAEYC accreditation requirements are the "gold standard" for high quality, developmentally appropriate ECE programs, but are rigorous and time-intensive.

- School start-up investments include concrete facility costs such as bathrooms, fencing, and age-appropriate playground equipment and furniture. It also includes cultural shifts and professional development for teachers and administrators in play-based curricula, observational assessments, family engagement, embedded social services, and possibly the school calendar year or hours of service. School districts will need time, administrative supports, and substantial start-up funding in order to implement quality preschool programs.
- Ongoing funding for district programming is also a consideration. Although S.56 changes the preschool ADM weight from 0.46 to 1.0 (a rough doubling), the total number of hours for 4 year-olds proposed increase by more than that ratio. Furthermore, district programs cost far more than community programs, but districts are already including these children in their pupil count, so they will be expected to “do more with less”. ADM weights should be increased proportionately to the number of hours expected to truly reflect high staff ratios and relatively high per-pupil costs in preschool programs.
- Historically the Universal PreK funds have provided community programs with a higher hourly rate than CCFAP funds (which is why they have been used) - meaning that community programs would lose access to funds that currently support quality. If the intention is that CCFAP funds would replace UPreK dollars, there should be a legislative mechanism to ensure that the funds are tied to inflationary pressures as current UPreK funds are..
- UPreK instituted some quality standards for qualifying early childhood programs. [Proposed changes to the STARS system](#) will further increase quality in these UPreK partner programs. Without UPreK dollars, we will need another mechanism to incentivize quality improvements in community programs.
- Community programs will be overseen by the CDD while public programs will be overseen by the AOE, leading to two SEPARATE systems of early childhood oversight. This creates a concern for the coherence of what represents a quality early childhood program and a divergence over time to a division between early care versus early education. Creating a single system of governance for the birth to five population would be helpful.

One shift that would be helpful for creating additional access and quality would be an increase in the number of hours provided by Universal PreK. An [October 2021 survey](#) of 30 Vermont school districts demonstrated that most districts think that the ideal “dosage” of an early education program is more than 20 hours/week. Increasing universal access to early childhood education to 20 hours/week by shifting the ADM weighting to 1.0 and proportionately increasing tuition payments to community partner programs would support quality improvements and access for all children and families. After 20 hours/week, if working families needed more care, CCFAP subsidy dollars could support access in those same programs.

In an ideal world, how much time should a high quality early childhood program offer children each week?

30 responses



Finally, I want to share with you some information today about how Universal PreK is working in our region. There is a brief handout at the end of this testimony that describes what Universal PreK looks like in Addison County for programs, families, and districts. I want to emphasize that in our region, Universal PreK is working for children, families, preschool programs, and school districts. Yes, there are administrative headaches, but we have systems to make preschool accessible and support children in high quality programs.

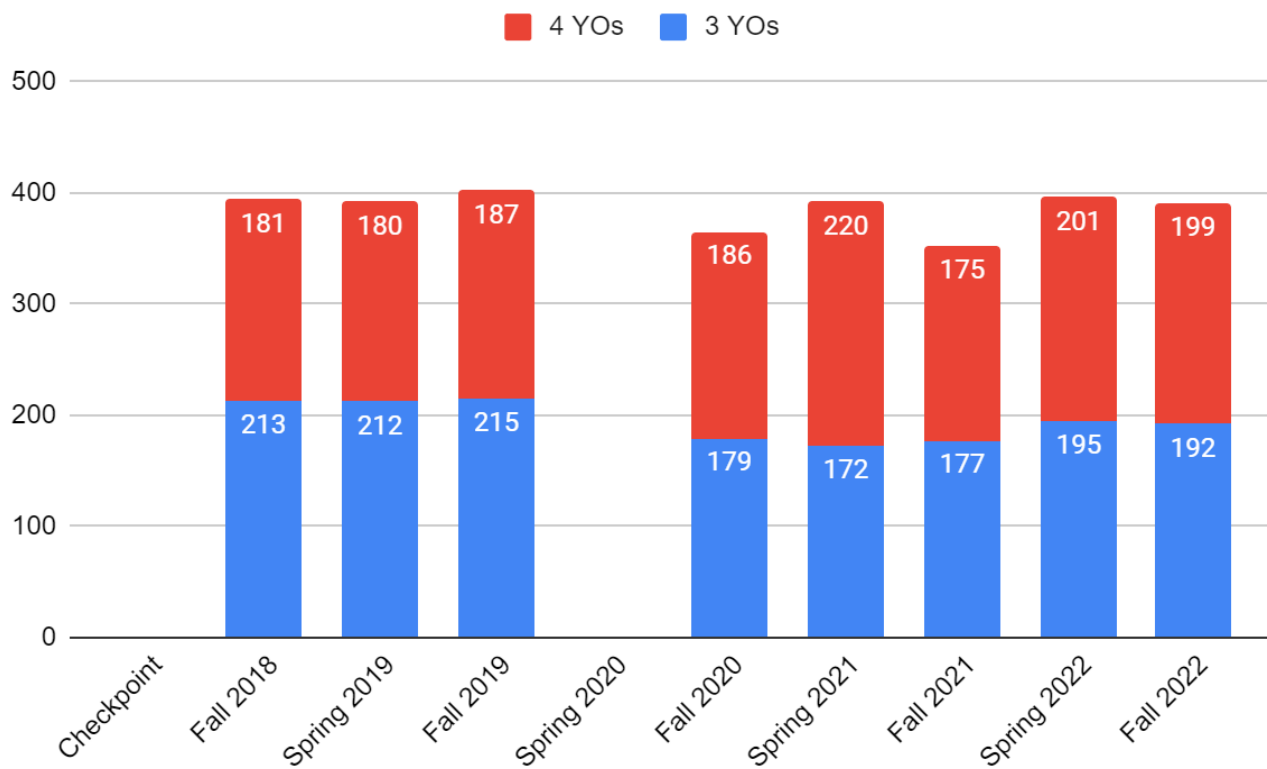
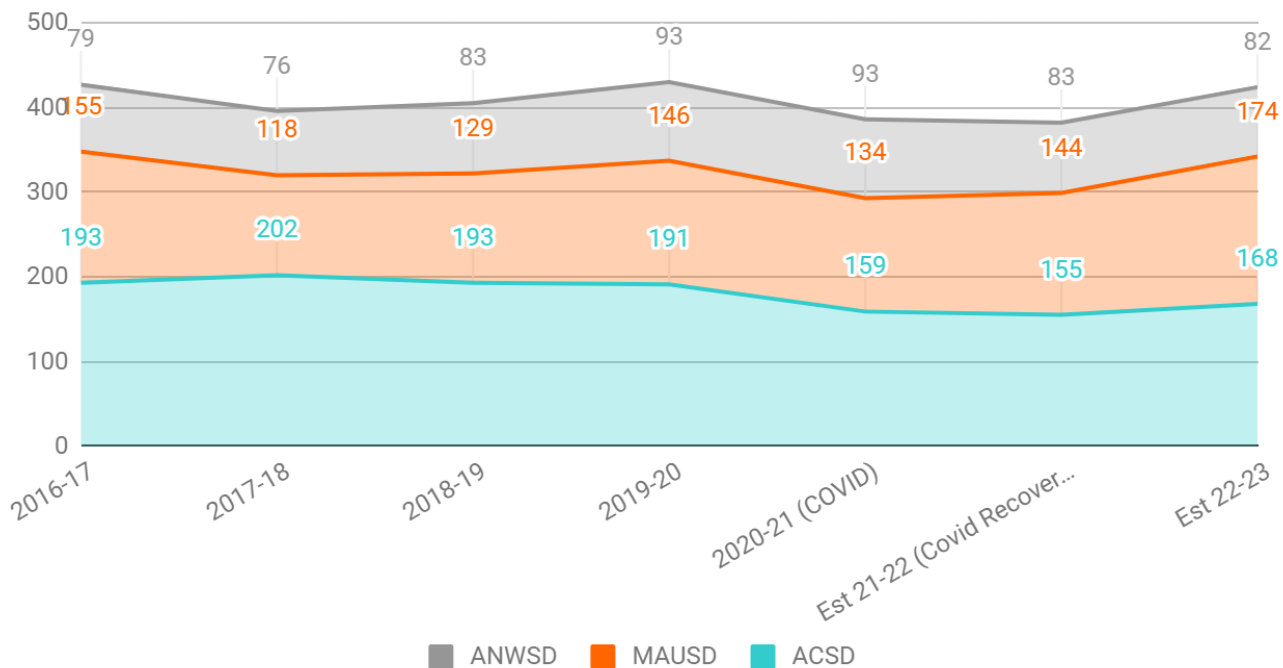
Roughly 80% or more of our children are enrolled in Addison County UPreK programs and even more are enrolled in non-partner early childhood programs; it is relatively rare for children to enter kindergarten with NO early childhood program experience.

Access to early childhood education is closely linked to capacity in high quality programs. This year, we have about 425 children enrolled in 36 total partner preschool programs in Addison, Rutland, and Chittenden counties (2 homes & 34 centers). In addition we have 8 school-based classrooms (taught by 7 teachers). About 76% of our publicly-funded preschool children are in private programs. During the pandemic, our area lost 1 center-based preschool partner for a loss of about 30 fewer preschool "slots". In addition, school program hours and make-up were restructured in all three school districts.

Historically, we have had a very even split of 3 and 4 year-old children enrolled in our preschool programs (public and private). Most early childhood programs in both schools and private settings serve children in mixed-age classrooms for children 3-5. Private programs rely on preschool programming to balance the costs of providing infant-toddler care which is far more expensive given the higher staffing ratios needed for that age group.

I am going to end this presentation by sharing some [data on preschool outcomes](#) in our county (see attached handout). Universal PreK requires programs use Teaching Strategies Gold to assess preschool student knowledge and skills in [multiple developmental domains](#). Teachers complete the developmental "checkpoints" twice annually with validated, authentic observational assessments. Normed developmental expectations are along a continuum for each age group or "grade".

## Countywide PreK Enrollment 2016-2022



These graphs show developmental progress of preschoolers over several years in the domains measured by TS Gold. Fall measurements are on the left and spring measurements are on the right. Green is meeting normed developmental expectations, blue is exceeding, and red is not yet meeting expectations.

For context, this longitudinal data on outcomes includes 3 and 4 year olds in both school and Universal PreK partner programs - generally between 400-450 children with about 75-80% in private settings. Lower numbers in the fall from children who may be newly enrolled in a preschool program make sense.

Here are the trends that I would like to highlight:

- TSG child progress data shows that high quality preschool education is making a difference to child outcomes across domains. While the data is not split out by public/private setting, I have not observed a substantial difference in outcomes based on that indicator - rather there seem to be anecdotal differences based on child-level factors such as family income or disability.
- Growth between fall and spring checkpoints is consistent and dramatic especially in Literacy and Mathematics.
- Covid has impacted child development in several domains especially SEL, Cognitive, and Language, but the results are not as dramatic as many expected.
- SEL and Mathematics indicators are consistently among the lowest.

In conclusion, I encourage you to:

- maintain a mixed delivery service in high quality preschool programs to promote equitable access
- support school development of high quality, developmentally appropriate preschool programming
- unify early childhood oversight at a state level to remove dual oversight - and provide for greater expertise at a state level in understanding the specific needs of this age group
- maintain Universal PreK access for all 3 year-olds at least to current levels,
- increase the number of Universal PreK hours through increased ADM weights and proportionately increase tuition payments to high-quality, prequalified community programs,
- support working family, non-citizen, and infant/toddler access and quality by implementing eligibility changes to CCFAP, and
- maintain incentives for quality improvement in all settings.

I am happy to provide more information and answer any questions you may have.

Thank you,

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## **Universal PreK (Act 166): An Addison County Primer**

### **Programs**

Public and private PreK programs must meet certain criteria as laid out by Act 166 and current statewide UPreK rules:

- Have teacher with VT endorsement in Early Childhood Education (ECE) or Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)
- Have 3 stars or higher with an approved STARS plan or be NAEYC accredited
- Align curriculum with Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS)
- Agree to include children with disabilities
- Agree to serve students without charge to families for a minimum of 10 hours per week, 35 weeks of school calendar year.
- Be in compliance with CDD licensing requirements
- Perform child progress assessments twice/year and hold parent-teacher conferences twice/year

When programs demonstrate they have met these criteria, they receive prequalification certificates from the Agency of Education and then form partnerships with our districts. We require that they submit attendance to us several times/year and there is regular communication about child progress.

### **Children and Families**

Eligible children are 3, 4, or 5 years old on or before September 1st (our kindergarten cut-off date) and not already enrolled in kindergarten.

In our districts, enrollment is seamless for families. They first enroll in the prequalified PreK program of their choice (based on schedule, location, and family preferences), then complete an application for tuition funding (with proof of residency) as part of the preschool enrollment packet. Programs return the completed applications to the family's resident school district.

Families are responsible for child care tuition fees beyond the hours of publicly funded PreK including any school vacation weeks/summer. However, eligible families may use CCFAP to cover remaining child care costs.

### **Districts**

Districts enroll preschool students in both public and private programs and include them in their pupil census to the state. Preschool students are weighted as 0.46 Average Daily Membership.

Tuition is paid directly from the school district of residence to the preschool program partner. The annual amount is set by the state and is tied to an index. This school year's amount is \$3,656 and next year's amount will be \$3,764. Funds are prorated for families that move in/out of the district.

### **Regional Coordination**

Our districts chose to collaboratively hire a regional UPreK Coordinator who serves all three districts. This means we have a central point of contact for families and programs, one unified contract, common enrollment practices for families, and consistency in communication and policies. Regional coordination supports families finding and enrolling in programs, supports programs in offering quality educational experiences and accessing needed supports (for children and staff). It aids school districts in resource management, paperwork, and supporting partner programs.