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Representative Peter Conlon, Chair
House Committee on Education
Vermont State House
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633

Re: Pre-K expansion, the funding formula, and the realities on the ground in MMUUSD

Dear Chair Conlon and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee on Pre-K. This letter is submitted for the Committee's record and expands on the points I shared in person. My goal is to put on paper what districts like ours are actually seeing, why we are investing in Pre-K, and where the current structure works against the policy direction the state has set.

Who we are and what we are doing

MMUUSD serves approximately 2,650 students across five towns: Bolton, Huntington, Jericho, Richmond, and Underhill. We operate eight schools. Next year we will serve 168 Pre-K students, across four buildings.

We are moving from partial-week to five full days of full school day programming. We are adding four classrooms, four teachers, and eight paraprofessionals. This is a nearly \$1,000,000 investment in our youngest learners.

We made this decision because nearly 200 MMUUSD families were sending their children to Pre-K programs outside our district, in Williston, Essex, and South Burlington, because we did not have space. Even with this expansion, we cannot meet all community demand.

We will leverage CCFAP funds to offset costs, but CCFAP does not cover the full expense of this expansion. The gap between what CCFAP reimburses and what it actually costs to operate high-quality programming falls on the district.

We believe this is the right thing to do. The research is unambiguous. Pre-K is where we close gaps before they open.

Why Pre-K matters

Pre-K is the most cost-effective intervention in our system. Children who arrive at kindergarten ready to learn require fewer interventions, fewer referrals, and fewer intensive supports throughout their school career.

Pre-K is also a workforce issue for our communities. When families cannot access affordable childcare and early education, parents, disproportionately mothers, cannot work. Our five towns feel this acutely in a state with some of the longest childcare waitlists in the country.

The inclusion problem that nobody talks about

Our Pre-K students with the most significant needs, children with disabilities and children with intensive behavioral support needs, are not always welcomed into private centers. Some are asked to leave. Private providers often lack the staffing, training, and infrastructure to serve children with complex IEPs or behavioral plans. When a child is removed from a private setting, the district is still responsible for that child's education.

Robust public Pre-K programs keep the pathway open for serving these children. The word robust matters. If public Pre-K programs are not large enough and strong enough to serve a broad population, they become de facto special education programs. When that happens, everyone loses. All children lose when there is reduced access to inclusive peer models. And the district loses the ability to offer the high-quality, mixed environment the research says works best for all children.

Public school programs have licensed special educators, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, behavioral support staff, and established referral systems already in place. No private center can replicate that infrastructure. When the state encourages Pre-K expansion, it should recognize that public schools are often the provider of best fit for the children who need the most support, and should not be relegated to provider of last resort.

The childcare desert that surrounds us

Most of our five towns have zero licensed center-based childcare for children birth to age three. Not limited options, zero. This is not unique to our district. Vermont's childcare shortage is well documented, but the reality on the ground in rural and small-town communities is more severe than statewide data suggests. When there is no center-based care for the youngest children, the pressure shifts entirely to the Pre-K entry point. Families who have been cobbling together informal care for three years arrive at Pre-K desperate for stable, reliable, full-day programming.

That amplifies the Pre-K capacity crisis. Districts are not just serving a normal enrollment pipeline. We are absorbing years of unmet childcare needs the moment children become eligible for public education.

The barriers the system creates

- **The funding formula penalizes Pre-K investment.** Pre-K students carry a weight of 0.46 in the LTWADM calculation, less than half of every other grade level. A Pre-K teacher costs the same as a second-grade teacher. The classroom takes the same square footage. But the formula treats every dollar invested in Pre-K as more than twice as expensive per weighted pupil as the identical dollar at any other grade level.
- **Concrete example.** When we add a Pre-K classroom of 18 students, our LTWADM increases by only 8.28 weighted pupils, not 18.

- **Expanding service intensity generates zero additional LTWADM.** Our Pre-K students moving from partial week to five full days receive dramatically more service, more hours, more staffing, more cost, but the denominator does not move at all. Every dollar of that increased service pushes our per-pupil spending up with nothing on the other side of the fraction.
- **The excess spending threshold makes it worse.** Under S.220 at 112%, our Pre-K expansion alone consumes roughly 21% of our total allowable spending growth. A district that expands Pre-K access, as the state is asking us to do, is structurally more likely to trigger the excess spending penalty than a district that does not. The formula creates a direct financial disincentive to do what the state wants.
- **Pre-K students receive none of the additive weights that reflect actual cost.** A seven-year-old who qualifies for free lunch, receives special education services, and is an English learner generates a weight well above 1.0 through stacked additional weights. That same child two years earlier in Pre-K generates 0.46, period. The formula assumes Pre-K children cost less to educate than any other student in the system. They do not. In many cases, they cost more.

What would help

- **Extend normal weighting, including additive weights, to all children.** The cost of educating a Pre-K student is the same as a kindergarten student. The AOE has studied this. Pre-K children who receive special education, who are English learners, and who qualify for free and reduced lunch should generate the same additive weights as their kindergarten peers. A weight of 1.0 as a baseline, with the same additive structure available to older students, would remove the structural penalty and accurately reflect cost.
- **Exclude Pre-K expansion costs from the excess spending threshold,** or at minimum establish a hold harmless provision for districts that are actively expanding Pre-K capacity in response to state policy. Districts should not be penalized for doing what the state asks.

Closing

MMUUSD is doing exactly what the state envisions. We are expanding high-quality, internally operated Pre-K programming to serve our communities. We are investing \$1,000,000, adding 12 positions, and serving 168 children. We are the place that says yes to every child, including the ones no one else will take. We are doing this because it is right for kids. But the system should support districts that make this commitment, not penalize them for it.

I am grateful for the Committee's attention to these issues and happy to connect or answer questions as the Committee's work continues.

Respectfully,

John Muldoon
 Superintendent, Mount Mansfield Unified Union School District

cc: Members, House Committee on Education