



Vermont Association for the
Education of Young Children

Date: Thursday, February 13, 2025

To: Vermont House Committee on Education
Vermont House Committee on Human Services

From: Sharron Harrington, Executive Director, Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VTAIEYC)

Re: Vermont's Universal Pre-Kindergarten Program

Good morning. My name is Sharron Harrington, and I am the Executive Director of the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VTAIEYC). VTAIEYC is a non-profit organization that is the largest membership organization for early childhood educators in the state, and we are the state affiliate of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), one of the country's leading early childhood education organizations. In Vermont, VTAIEYC works to advance equity and excellence in early childhood education. We also partner with the Child Development Division to administer a broad range of programs and services for early childhood educators, including Vermont's early childhood education quality coaching and support program, known as SPARQS, Vermont's Early Childhood Education Youth Apprenticeship Program, the TEACH Early Childhood Scholarship Program, Professional Development Grants and Bonuses, and the Vermont Early Childhood Education Student Loan Repayment Assistance Program.

What's Working

At the heart of everything we do at VTAIEYC are Vermont's young children and their families. We, as early childhood educators, do what we do in service to them. As you've heard from my fellow PEIC members, Vermont's current Universal Pre-K (UPK) Program is in many ways working well for Vermont's children and their families and is also supporting the quality and sustainability of early childhood education programs throughout the state. The current model is child- and family-centered; it allows families to choose the setting that works best for their child and their family's needs through a mixed-delivery system, especially children from working families who may need a program closer to where an adult in the household works than where the family lives. It also supports quality practices in child care programs and strengthens program stability.

A testament to the success of this approach are Vermont's UPK participation rates and child outcomes. Vermont is currently ranked 2nd in the country for 3-year-old participation in state-funded pre-K and 6th for 4-year-olds.¹ Our state's mixed-delivery approach is helping Vermont to achieve some of the highest participation rates in the country. Our UPK program is also yielding positive gains for children. According to the most recent Ready for Kindergarten Survey (R4K!S) report from the Vermont Agency of Education, in the 2023-2024 school year, 87% of children who had attended a UPK program before kindergarten were assessed as "Ready for Kindergarten" (demonstrating at least a practicing level of kindergarten readiness on many items in the assessment) compared to 79% of children who did not

¹ Friedman-Krauss, A., Barnett, W.S., et. all. (2024). The State of Preschool Yearbook 2023. National Institute for Early Education Research. Retrieved from https://nieer.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/2023_nieer_yearbook_8-9-24.pdf.

attend a UPK program before kindergarten.² This is a strong indicator that our state's mixed-delivery approach supports developmental best practices for young children - starting pre-K at age 3, limiting transitions for the child, and continuity of care and adult relationships.³ On a personal note, I've recently been able to witness the positive impacts of our state's UPK program from a family perspective instead of from the view as an early childhood educator. Vermont's UPK program was one of the motivating factors for my daughter and her young family to recently move back to Vermont. They were able to enroll my granddaughter in a program that best meets her needs and the needs of her family. As working parents, they need full day, full calendar year programming and strongly believe consistency is critical for their child who was born during the pandemic. They are pleased with their relocation to Vermont and are already looking forward to their second child having access to two years of ten hours of publicly funded pre-kindergarten education because the cost of full time child care is one of their major household expenses.

Ways to Strengthen UPK

VTAEYC agrees that there is still work to be done to strengthen Vermont's UPK program, and we believe that this can be achieved by building on what's currently working and continuing to grow our early childhood education workforce.

We fully support the PEIC's recommendations to streamline administrative procedures and update the program's funding formula for both public school-based classrooms and child care program-based classrooms.

Additionally, VTAEYC supports expanding the number of hours funded by the UPK program. Nationally, state-funded pre-K programs have shifted from part-day programming to school-day programming. According to the most recent national report on state-funded pre-K programs, 72% of children in state-funded preschool programs attend at least a school-day program. This is up from 40% in 2010.⁴

Another critical piece to consider when evaluating how best to strengthen Vermont's UPK program is our early childhood education workforce. Both public schools and child care programs continue to struggle to recruit and retain well-prepared early childhood educators to lead classrooms. Vermont must continue to invest in workforce programs, many of which have waitlists and are unable to fully address current workforce needs. This includes the Early Childhood Education Youth Apprenticeship Program, the Early Childhood Education Student Loan Repayment Assistance Program, and the TEACH Early Childhood Scholarship Program. As indicated in the PEIC report, these supports have led to more early childhood educators in private programs attaining AOE licensure so they can be qualified to be UPK partners. An effective "on-ramp", these programs have supported career mobility in both the private and public sector. VTAEYC partnered with the Agency of Education on the provisional licensure project which has been another valuable pathway to achieve AOE licensure.. Additionally, Vermont's early childhood educators have been working since 2018 to collaboratively develop a shared vision for clear, professional pathways in this field. VTAEYC was proud to submit a Sunrise Review request to Vermont's Office of Professional Regulation this past spring, on behalf of thousands of early childhood

² Vermont Agency of Education. (January 9, 2025). Ready for Kindergarten! Survey (R4K!S) 2023-2024. p. 6. Retrieved from <https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/edu-ready-for-kindergarten-2023-2024-survey-report.pdf>.

³ Barnett, W.S. & Jung, K. (2021). Effects of New Jersey's Abbot preschool program on children's achievement, grade retention, and special education through tenth grade. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 56, 248-259.

⁴ Friedman-Krauss, A., Barnett, W.S., et. all. (2024). The State of Preschool Yearbook 2023. National Institute for Early Education Research. Retrieved from https://nieer.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/2023_nieer_yearbook_8-9-24.pdf.

educators. The number one indicator of quality in a young child's early experiences is the qualifications of the educator who spends their days with them.

Conclusion

As you consider the findings of the PEIC and how best to strengthen UPK, I encourage you to remember the most important part of this entire program: Vermont's 3- and 4-year-olds and their families. We have an opportunity to build on what's already working well, expand access, and continue to ensure that we have a strong early childhood education workforce to support the education of Vermont's future generations.