

Date: March 11, 2026  
To: Members of the Vermont House Committee on Human Services  
From: Sharron Harrington, Executive Director, Vermont Association for the Education of  
Young  
Children (VTAEYC)  
Re: Universal Pre-K In Context of Act 73

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Good afternoon. For the record I am Sharron Harrington, Executive Director of the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VTAEYC).

VTAEYC's focus is on what's best for children and families, and for the early childhood educators who serve them. That is the lens I brought to the Prek Implementation Committee and that is the lens I bring today. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

I want to thank you for your thoughtful work addressing the incredible challenges of education transformation. The good news is, UPK is working really well. Vermont is already nationally recognized for its current preK system and we have the obligation to protect that success, and the opportunity to build on it with intention. Changes to this system should be made slowly, methodically, with awareness of other changes underway in our complex and intersecting early childhood education and public school systems, and most of all, avoiding unintended consequences. I will focus on what's best for young children, and what's happening to strengthen quality and retention in our early childhood educator workforce—a workforce which, while on a promising upward trend, is still in shortage.

I'll tell you a bit more about VTAEYC before I begin my testimony. VTAEYC is a non-profit organization that is the largest membership and advocacy 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. As a national organization, NAEYC's key role is to promote high-quality early learning for each and every child, birth through age 8, by connecting practice, policy, and research.

In Vermont, VTAEYC works to advance equity and excellence in early childhood education. Our organization's vision is that Vermont's children thrive and realize their true promise in supportive communities. We partner with the Child Development Division to administer a broad range of programs and services for early childhood educators and regulated child care programs. VTAEYC is laser-focused on recruiting and retaining our workforce that educates our youngest children, and our top priorities this legislative session are protecting child care

funding and strengthening our early childhood education workforce, because everything we do and every investment we make as a state to increase access to child care depends on having a stable workforce of well-supported early childhood educators who are qualified to teach and care for our youngest children.

I also want to note that VTAEYC's leadership incorporates the diversity of our mixed-delivery system. Our board is led by a Director of Early Childhood Education for one of Vermont's supervisory unions, and between our board and senior staff, we have expertise in navigating UPK from coordinator and partner lenses including public school, private centers, public centers, parent child centers, family child care, and Head Start.

And finally, as Vermont's professional association for early childhood educators, we're committed to including the voices of working early childhood educators whenever policies that impact them are on the table. We would be more than happy to connect you with early childhood educators working in our mixed-delivery UPK system for further testimony.

## What is working: Child outcomes

At the heart of everything we do at VTAEYC are Vermont's young children and their families. We, as early childhood educators, do what we do in service to them. As the state affiliate of a leading national association, we are informed by both national research and best practices from NAEYC, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), the Commission on Professional Excellence in Early Childhood Education, and others. These also align with the research and policy recommendations of our state partners, and specifically [our state's early childhood strategic plan, developed by Building Bright Futures](#).

There are many elements known to be best for children and families in UPK design. I will name a few:

- **A mixed-delivery system**, which means families can access UPK in different child care settings: public schools, center-based programs, and family homes. This delivery system recognizes that in order for families to participate they need to be able to choose an accessible setting that works for their child. More settings that offer UPK means more opportunities for families and fewer child care deserts in Vermont communities, and most important, it means fewer transitions throughout the day for very young children.
- **Extended-day, extended-year preschool programs** have a greater impact than half-day programs. This is also supported through the flexibility of mixed-delivery.
- **Including both three and four year olds in UPK.** At kindergarten entry, better child outcomes are associated with two years of preschool compared to only one, and we hear this from school superintendents and administrators as well.

Vermont's current Universal Pre-K (UPK) Program was developed with this expertise, and as a result, it's working well for Vermont's children and their families.

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, especially children from working families who may need full-day and full-year care, and who need a program closer to where an adult in the household works rather than where the family lives. A testament to the success of this approach are Vermont's UPK participation rates and child outcomes:

[Vermont is ranked 2nd in the country for both 3-year-old and 4 year old participation in state-funded pre-K.](#) Only the District of Columbia is ahead of Vermont. Our state's mixed-delivery approach is helping Vermont to achieve some of the highest UPK participation rates in the country, and yielding positive gains for children.

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.

On a personal note, I've recently been able to witness the positive impacts of our state's UPK program from a family perspective. Vermont's UPK program was one of the motivating factors for my daughter and her young family to move back to Vermont. When my first grandchild was a year old, her parents, an educator and pediatric occupational therapist, were concerned about her educational opportunities in another state. One key factor in their decision was Vermont providing UPK at three years old. Now, my two young grandchildren are enrolled in a program that best meets their needs. As working parents, they need full day, full calendar year programming and strongly believe consistency is critical for their children. They are pleased with their relocation to Vermont and although the cost of full time child care is one of their major household expenses, the ten hours of publicly funded pre-kindergarten education through Act 166, and child care tuition assistance through Act 76, help them afford to stay here.

### **What is working: Increasing program quality**

UPK strengthens the quality and sustainability of early childhood education programs. Act 166, and the opportunity in mixed-delivery for private programs to become UPK partners, was the impetus for program quality improvements to many early childhood education programs throughout the state. Act 166 really started this by requiring a license for educators in UPK programs, partners as well as public schools. We saw individual early childhood educators increase their qualifications so their programs could partner with schools to offer UPK.

It takes a lot for early childhood education programs to become a qualified UPK site. Individual educators need to meet qualification requirements—which takes time, money, and

resources—and programs need to deliver additional services and programming—which also takes time, money, and resources.

Vermont has a lot to be proud of in how we've given early childhood educators access to scholarship and grant programs to increase their qualifications, and programs the support to make quality improvements. We want to make sure we continue to move toward equitable access to UPK for our youngest children by supporting more child care programs and public schools to become qualified.

## **The program that helps our current workforce qualify to deliver UPK**

We've also learned something essential: Growing a historically under-resourced workforce takes time and support. Increasing workforce qualifications takes time and support. We administer a variety of programs to meet educators where they are in their careers, including the Early Childhood Education Youth Apprenticeship Program, the Student Loan Repayment Assistance Program for Early Childhood Educators, and the TEACH Early Childhood Scholarship Program. 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.

The TEACH Early Childhood Vermont scholarship program helps early childhood educators access higher education, debt-free. One of these models is AOE Educator Licensure with an endorsement in early childhood education. This is a bachelor's degree plus the AOE's licensure requirements, which include a portfolio and passing the Praxis exam.

The reason VTAEYC administers this program is because this is the qualification required for UPK program partnership. Since 2017, 105 early childhood educators have completed the TEACH AOE Educator Licensure scholarship model, and 35 have completed the Provisional AOE Licensure model, for a cumulative total of 140. This is the corner where VTAEYC overlaps with public schools: we administer the scholarships that help early childhood educators earn an AOE license, which is the qualification already required for UPK through Act 166.

I'm going to take you on just a slight tangent here: A number of educators who earn AOE licensure with ECE endorsement do switch settings to work in public schools, in large part because the pay and benefits are typically much better. Parity has improved since Act 76 increased and stabilized child care financial assistance reimbursement, and VTAEYC is advocating for systems that will create equitable compensation across early childhood education settings.

## What works to increase workforce qualifications: slow, phased in

Many early childhood educators are nontraditional students, meaning they're pursuing qualifications while working full time, and need slower timelines as well as financial support. And this is happening at a time when many of our state's higher education institutions are experiencing instability, and some degree pathways that were there five years ago are no longer available to Vermonters, [according to a higher ed landscape analysis for ECE programs we conducted last year](#). So incentivizing early childhood educators to pursue higher ed, and developing clear, predictable, flexible higher ed pathways for them, benefits multiple groups: our workforce, the children served by them, and Vermont's higher ed institutions.

We have developed great partnerships with higher ed institutions, building flexible pathways and making it easier for students to transfer credits. Our career advancement team is responsive to our workforce's needs, and we invest in innovative models like apprenticeship programs, mentoring, and communities of practice. And we work with CDD and Northern Lights at Community College of Vermont to award credential bonuses to early childhood educators who successfully complete new qualifications.

These workforce programs are vital. Many early childhood educators are paid better than they used to be, but it's still not a high-paying job. For the full context, I need to remind you about something we don't talk about as much anymore. Before Act 76 passed, this system was in full-blown crisis. Early childhood educators, even or especially those with degrees, could not make enough money working in child care to support themselves, and were leaving to work at Home Depot. That's still how it is in most US states. Not in Vermont. Act 76 stabilized the system, but in some ways, we're building a workforce from scratch, or pretty close.

## What the early childhood educator shortage looks like now

We have a serious workforce shortage, though I would no longer call it a crisis. It's taken an immense amount of resources to move this workforce from crisis, to breathing room. We're moving in the right direction. [The latest workforce report from CDD from January 2026](#) shows that between 2022 and 2024, we've increased the number of individuals working in regulated child care by 8.5%. Between 2022-2024, 73 early childhood educators increased their qualifications to either a bachelor's degree or a bachelor's degree and AOE teacher's license (Levels IVA and IVB on the Northern Lights Career Ladder).

The [most recent number we have for how many early childhood educators Vermont needs to meet demand is 2,314](#). This hasn't been updated since CDD issued their workforce report showing 8.5% growth. This growth is great news, especially considering child care programs are expanding thanks to Act 76, meaning there are more roles for early childhood educators to fill. We have to continue to grow and strengthen our workforce.

What I really want you to understand is that increasing workforce qualifications and retaining early childhood educators is a shared goal. And we've learned that requiring increased qualifications requires intentional and well-designed supports, and a multi-year phased-in implementation period.

## Conclusion

We know Vermont's UPK is extremely effective based on our nation-leading participation rates, we know UPK supports positive child outcomes as demonstrated by [AOE's Ready for Kindergarten! data](#), and we know UPK has helped increase program quality as a result of increases in early childhood educator credentials.

And yes, there are opportunities to continue to improve UPK. We believe that this can be achieved by building on what's currently working and continuing to grow our early childhood education workforce. Vermont's early childhood strategic plan is moving us in this direction: we have a finance study underway, we have data collection underway. Our state strategic plan is the framework for improving UPK in alignment with complex systems, protecting everything that's working. We support the strategic plan's recommendations to streamline administrative procedures and update UPK's funding formula for both public school-based classrooms and child care program-based classrooms. We support expanding the number of hours funded by the UPK program. These are thoughtful suggestions supported by data.

When considering changes to UPK we must make sure we don't put successful aspects of the program at risk. By focusing on equity and quality, you're asking the right questions to protect what works in UPK in the context of Act 73 education transformation. Yes, let's expand offerings for four year olds, but not at the expense of three year olds, whom we're so successful at reaching and who benefit so much from UPK. Yes, let's increase early childhood educator qualifications, but slowly, phased in, and highly supported, which we know is the only successful way.

I will add that when evaluating how best to strengthen Vermont's UPK program, the answer is by expanding 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.

Most of all: thank you for staying committed to protecting what's working well for Vermont's youngest children and their families, and for centering those impacted by changes to UPK when considering any changes to this successful program.

Thank you; I appreciate the invitation to provide testimony today.