

Public Comment on Education  
Sharon Ellingwood, Lemington VT  
May 7, 2026

Dear Rep. Quimby, and Rep. Holcombe, and Committee Chair Kornheiser,

Thank you Beth for your supportive testimony in Ways and Means today. Representative Holcombe, I also appreciate your thoughtful comments and advocacy for the students of the NEK Choice district. As a NEK Choice SD and Essex North Supervisory Union Board Member who has carried this torch for over 5 years for children who cannot access Universal Pre K I wish I had been there to answer questions and provide additional input. Head Start programs are simply not a workable option for families in Concord and Brighton. The available Vermont locations are too far away, especially for parents whose commuting patterns take them into New Hampshire. Asking families to drive 30–40 minutes in the opposite direction before work is not realistic. There is also an income cap. Right now, some of our students receive nothing, zero Pre-K access at all. As a result, many parents cannot fully participate in the workforce, which also disadvantages their children. Although the UPK statute passed years ago, current students spanning kindergarten through 9th grade have missed two full years of Pre-K opportunities because access does not exist. Yet our residents pay for other Vermont students to have this universal benefit. For five years, I have led the effort for our families and communities in the NEK Choice SD who have tried to solve this issue despite having limited representation and unique geographic challenges. We've seen many Superintendents and board members come and go, and I'm still here working on a solution. When you asked if those who gave testimony are paying attention I want you to know that I have personally been leading this on my SD and SU board for over 5 years. Janet McLaughlin from the VT CDD visited Essex County for a day. She drove all of the distances and remarked at the true picture of distance, and low population density, and vast forest tracts with Federal and State easements to cross. We also visited programs across the river in NH, agreed that quality is a paramount concern and asked hard questions with true due diligence.

I also want to clarify your statement that the Canaan School is two to four miles from Colebrook. Depending on the road and location, the distance from home can be 8–12 miles in the opposite direction, often involving dirt roads and difficult winter conditions. Families travel according to work patterns, or where grandparents or family can provide after-school care, and those patterns frequently center around New Hampshire communities. It is impractical for a parent working in Colebrook (or further) to drive a child north to Canaan and then backtrack to work every day.

I appreciated the discussion around contracting, but the question remains: with whom, and where? In a "central" community like Maidstone, where there is little commuting and many students ultimately enter New Hampshire K–12 systems, it makes far more sense for our New Hampshire public school partners to welcome these students early, identify their needs, and support successful transitions into the systems they will attend long term. This will benefit a few students that have nothing and will mean a lot to those families.

The number of students in Guildhall did not double. It went from 8 to 42. We are attracting young NH families to move to Vermont to earn, and stay in our state which tremendously helps Essex County demographics in so many ways.

It is also important to remember that Vermont remains the LEA for students with 504s and IEPs receiving services in New Hampshire. As the parent of a Vermont child with a Vermont IEP attending a NH school, I saw firsthand the tremendous work Essex North Supervisory Union did to monitor progress and ensure students met their goals. The LEA always knows if they are meeting their goals because staff attend NH IEP meetings and write the plans. These are still Vermont students with Vermont responsibilities and protections. They have VT plans and had to meet those gates to secure one.

Living in Essex County means navigating long distances, winter roads, workforce shortages, and limited access to basic services that many other communities take for granted. These challenges are real for families every single day. While I work closely with Senator Ingalls and Representative Larry Labor, we currently do not have a single legislator who actually lives in Essex County. Essex County is the only County in Vermont with no resident Legislator.

Our communities are split into Essex-Caledonia North and Essex-Caledonia South, and that diluted representation has real consequences for families trying to have their voices heard. Because Essex County has the smallest population in Vermont, its Leg districts are combined with neighboring counties, then diluted and split in half: Caledonia Essex North and Caledonia Essex South. This can make local priorities feel diluted compared to counties with larger populations and multiple resident legislators. This has very real consequences for our residents. When the Department of Finance & Management created the Vermont Community Index (VCI) in 2022, note that the towns in my area ranked among the lowest in the state regarding capacity to address challenges like these. I truly appreciate the advocacy for ensuring high-quality programs, and I know those concerns stem from a desire for the best outcomes for children. At the same time, after five years of working to find any workable solution for families in our county, it was difficult to hear questions raised about our efforts without a full understanding of the unique realities and barriers in Essex County with no resident Legislator.

I remain deeply committed to this issue. I do not have the ability to walk past inequities and accept that our youngest students go without opportunities that other children in Vermont receive as a matter of course.

I would welcome the opportunity to talk further and compare Granville's needs with those of Essex County, as this issue is incredibly meaningful to me. The work itself truly fascinates me. I welcome a call anytime. I warmly invite you to reach out any time for information on this part of the state.

Respectfully,

Sharon Ellingwood, Lemington, VT  
NEK Choice School District Board Member  
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