

Testimony for House Ways and Means regarding Universal Prekindergarten

DCF Deputy Commissioner Janet McLaughlin

January 21, 2026

As part of Vermont's cradle-to-career vision, Vermont's Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program is jointly overseen by the Agency of Education (AOE) and the Department for Children and Families (DCF) and aims to ensure that all Vermont children benefit from high-quality pre-kindergarten education. Established in Act 166 of 2014, the AOE's Early Education and DCF's Child Development Division (CDD) work together to implement the program and build from the strengths and assets of agency, school, and community partners. Over the last ten years, the AOE and CDD have worked together in partnership with school districts and community-based early childhood education programs towards the goal of ensuring that Vermont children enter kindergarten ready to thrive in schools prepared to build upon that foundation.

Vermont's UPK program demonstrates strong participation and results. Vermont is a national leader in providing access to high-quality prekindergarten (PreK) education in inclusive settings. The state boasts high enrollment, ranking second nationally for program participation among 3 and 4-year-olds. The high participation rates are paired with a strong commitment to quality, with assessments at the program and child levels. This investment has translated to positive child outcomes. Longitudinal data demonstrates that children who participate in Vermont's Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) program enter kindergarten more ready to learn than their peers who did not attend. The jointly-issued [Universal Prekindergarten Report 2024](#) provides data on enrollment, access, quality and expenditures; the 2025 report will be issued in the coming weeks.

The jointly-chaired [Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee](#) (PEIC) delved into potential changes to UPK from July 2023 to November 2024, and issued a report in December 2024 that reflected significant research, analysis and discussion. The PEIC agreed on four foundational recommendations:

- Maintain the 10-hour/week (350 hour/year) benefit for both three-year-olds and four-year-olds.
- Expand prekindergarten, including hours and services, for four-year olds.
- Commission an analysis of Vermont's pupil weight for prekindergarten.
- Review methodology for establishing prekindergarten payments to non-school-based programs and propose updates.

In addition, the committee identified the need for additional planning to:

- Strengthen data collection and analysis to inform future changes
- Build on Vermont's use of best practices (mixed delivery, 3s and 4s, for all) in ensuring access
- Build on Vermont's strong foundation for quality to meet additional national benchmarks
- Strengthen and streamline implementation

In December 2025, AHS and AOE issued a [Joint Report on Elevating the Status of Early Childhood Education](#) as requested in Act 76 of 2023. In this report, the Agencies re-affirmed their commitment to early childhood education and shared how their agencies are evolving to even better support positive outcomes for children, effective partnership, and efficient administration. Building from the PEIC's work, the Agencies acknowledged the need to continue building state capacity and leadership related to streamlined oversight and governance, data systems and monitoring, and quality – and the major steps they plan to take to address them. It also highlights that several barriers to fully realizing the promise of Universal Prekindergarten align closely with core organizational and financial challenges that Vermont is aiming to solve via Act 73 of 2025:

“The reorganization of school districts in Vermont along with a revised funding system will address many challenges in the current UPK administration and may impact the Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program in several ways. Act 73 has the potential to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of UPK programs by providing district-level coordination and support, improving resource allocation, and ensuring consistent quality and governance across all prekindergarten settings. We must be intentional in assessing how scale and revised funding will support expanded UPK access as decisions from Act 73 move forward, and there are key decisions about UPK roles and responsibilities to be made first in order to provide clarity on how to fund the oversight responsibilities.”

Also in late 2025, CDD, along with AOE, Building Bright Futures, Department of Health and Department of Mental Health, successfully secured a Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five Systems-Building Grant to support multiple projects designed to strengthen early childhood education for Vermont's families. One project will be a focused, consultant-supported process to develop a streamlined, coherent statewide framework for UPK system in alignment with Vermont's Early Childhood Strategic Plan 2030. The major goals are to:

- Improve access by ensuring UPK policies and supports work consistently for families in every region/district and across program types.
- Clarify and align UPK governance, funding, and expectations across agencies and settings so public schools, community-based programs, family child care, and Head Start partners operate within a coherent statewide framework.

- Reduce administrative burden and duplication by identifying and addressing unnecessary differences in oversight, monitoring, and reporting.
- Create the foundation for shared UPK data governance and integration so Vermont can track participation, quality, and outcomes across the mixed-delivery system using consistent definitions and low-burden processes.

An interagency team – led by CDD, AOE, and BBF – will guide the strategy and implementation of this project with advice from a Steering Committee composed of statewide and local leaders from school districts, community-based and home-based UPK programs, and Head Start partners. The project is expected to run from April to December 2026.

As the Legislature considers Universal Prekindergarten, in addition to the research and information found in the PEIC report, it's important to consider that UPK is part of an intertwined early childhood education ecosystem. Key factors include:

- Vermont has seven Head Start/Early Head Start recipients that together serve approximately 1,250 children annually, primarily 3 and 4yos and bring about \$27–28 million in federal funding into the state each year. Services are targeted to families with the greatest need, with eligibility primarily based on income at or below the federal poverty level and priority given to children experiencing homelessness, foster care, disability, or other significant risk factors.
- All young children with disabilities should have access to inclusive high-quality early childhood programs, where they are provided with individualized and appropriate support in meeting high expectations. IDEA Part B, Section 619 addresses children 3 to 5, and school districts are responsible for ensuring all children ages 3 to 5 receive the special education services to which they are entitled in the least restrictive setting. Vermont exceed benchmarks and performs much better than other states in providing inclusive experiences for children because of our accessible and flexible UPK program.
- Many excellent communities have developed substantial and well-functioning UPK programs for 3-, 4-, and 5- year-olds not yet enrolled in Prekindergarten. This includes both publicly-operated UPK programs and community-based programs. Many of these programs leverage both UPK and CCFAP to ensure affordable, accessible early learning that matches family needs and reduces the needs for transitions that are logically challenging and not necessarily developmentally-appropriate for this age group. This is very similar to the use of public education + CCFAP for school-age children. In addition, many early childhood educators, during testimony on UPK, have pointed to value of

interaction between 3- and 4-year-old students as important to this developmental stage.

- Major changes to PreK delivery can have negative impacts on the availability of infant toddler care and destabilize child care programs overall. This has been documented in other states (most recently [California](#)). This is because historical and practical factors mean that preschool often covers losses on infants and toddlers. Vermont has two years of cost modeling on early childhood education in community-based programs – including specific examination of UPK revenue expenses – that explores this dynamic in detail. In particular, it's important to note that:
 - Aspirational wages and benefits, closer to those paid in public schools, are not affordable in any model, including those that blend UPK, CCFAP, and private pay tuition.
 - UPK costs are not fully covered by the UPK statewide tuition for community-based private programs in nearly all models and the amount paid to these programs are not adjusted for disability, language, or economic disadvantage.
- There is limited availability of afterschool and summer care for PreK-aged children outside of full-day, full-year 0-5 programs. This reflects working families' need in the current ecosystem as well as the economic reality of running programs for these age groups.