



Date: January 30, 2026
To: Chair Bongartz and members of the Senate Committee on Education
CC: Representative Rey Garofano and Senator Martine Larocque Gulick, Legislative members on the State Advisory Council
From: Dr. Morgan Crossman, Executive Director, Building Bright Futures, and Linda Michniewicz, Building Bright Futures Regional Manager for Caledonia/Southern Essex and Orleans/Northern Essex
Re: Ensuring Equitable Access to Universal Prekindergarten in Geographically Isolated Communities

Building Bright Futures (BBF) appreciates the Committee's attention to the persistent challenge of inequitable access to universal prekindergarten (UPK) in geographically isolated regions of Vermont, particularly in Essex County and parts of the Northeast Kingdom.

BBF is designated in statute as Vermont's Early Childhood State Advisory Council. Our role is not to support or oppose specific legislation, but to monitor the early childhood system, elevate community experience and data, and advise policymakers on implementation considerations that affect children, families, and providers.

Geographic Inequity in Current Act 166 (Universal Prekindergarten Education) Policy

While Vermont is a national leader in UPK access overall, families in Essex County face structural barriers that effectively deny them access to publicly funded pre-K. The region's unique geography, limited local supply, and longstanding cross-border school enrollment patterns mean that many families must either travel unreasonable distances or pay privately to access early learning opportunities. For some families, neither option is feasible.

Every Vermont child should have access to high-quality pre-K that sets them up for success in kindergarten and beyond. Too many families, especially in communities without local options, are left without a clear pathway to high quality pre-K. This inequity runs counter to the intent of Vermont's universal pre-K system and undermines early identification, school readiness, and long-term outcomes for children across the state. By ensuring access for children who currently have no viable option, we can fulfill the promise of universal pre-K and create a stronger foundation for all Vermont kids.

Vermont's Early Childhood Strategic Plan and Early Childhood State Advisory Council Policy Recommendation

Through Vermont's Early Childhood Strategic Plan and 2026 Policy Recommendations, the SAC has called on the State to examine how best to provide continuity of pre-K and related services in rural and border regions, including communities where children often attend kindergarten in neighboring states.

This inequity is directly addressed in the strategic plan under goal 3 of the strategic plan, "All children and families have access to high-quality opportunities that promote child development and well-being", to

Increase equitable access to early childhood education by ensuring families, regardless of setting or geographic area, have options that meet their diverse needs.



The 2026 policy recommendation reflects sustained feedback from families and regional partners that the current UPK system does not function equitably in all geographic contexts.

As Vermont implements Act 73, ensure that prekindergarten expansion maintains access for 3-year-olds while exploring increased hours for 4-year-olds within a mixed-delivery model, consistent with recommendations from the Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee (PEIC). As part of broader education transformation efforts, establish appropriate pre-K weighting within the state's funding formula to support universal access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate programs that reflect the true cost of early learning, inclusion, and family engagement. To ensure access is truly universal, special consideration must be given to the unique local context and needs of rural and border communities.

Implementation Considerations

In particular, provisions that rely on access to publicly funded prekindergarten programs in neighboring states assume the availability of comparable, accessible pre-K options. In practice, this may not be the case. New Hampshire does not operate a universal pre-K system, and publicly funded preschool slots, where they exist, may be limited, competitive, or restricted by residency requirements. Without a clear understanding of program capacity, eligibility rules, and enrollment practices, families could remain effectively excluded despite statutory authorization.

For this reason, BBF encourages the Committee to ground next steps in local and regional expertise. Families, school districts, early childhood providers, and regional leaders in border communities are best positioned to assess whether proposed mechanisms will translate into real access for children. Their insight will be critical to understanding:

- Whether neighboring programs can reliably serve Vermont children
- What barriers related to capacity, eligibility, or transportation may persist
- What additional provisions or safeguards may be needed to ensure equity in practice

Additional data will support our ability to fully understand the scope of this access gap and ensure that Vermont's public investments are reaching children equitably. The Child Development Division and the Agency of Education can also support understanding the scope of the access gap and where funds are currently supporting children in out-of-state programs.

While the number of children affected may be small, these children and families still deserve the same access to high quality pre-K. Collecting and sharing this information will help Vermont strengthen the promise of universal pre-K and build a more equitable pathway for all communities.

BBF appreciates the Committee's focus on addressing geographic inequities in pre-K access and encourages continued engagement with impacted communities as legislative options are refined. We stand ready to support this work through data, regional convening, and ongoing system monitoring.