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Testimony in Support of S.214
Senate Education Committee

Friday, January 30, 2026

Thank you, Chairman Bongartz and members of the Committee.

My name is Sharon Ellingwood. I serve on the NEK Choice School District Board and the Essex North Supervisory Union Board, representing some of Vermont's most rural communities in Essex County. Our member towns include Norton, Lemington, Bloomfield, Brunswick, Maidstone, Guildhall, Granby, Victory, East Haven, and Kirby. Nine of our ten towns have a population density of less than 7 people per square mile.

I am submitting this testimony to urge the Committee to correct an inadvertent statutory barrier that has prevented children in geographically isolated areas from accessing Universal Pre K. I also urge the Committee to address this issue now through S.214, rather than deferring it to broader education reform efforts.

Along the Connecticut River, students frequently access K through 12 education out of state. This pattern is not based on convenience, but on necessity. School choice in this region functions as a lifeline. It aligns with where parents work, where childcare and after school care are available, where grandparents can provide support, where families receive medical care, and where winter travel is shortest and safest. Our towns are very small, and local economies are fragile.

Because of a technical statutory barrier, we currently have geographically isolated students in Kindergarten through tenth grade who were barred from accessing Pre K out of state. For nearly ten years, rural families, particularly in Essex County, have effectively been excluded from full Universal Pre K access due to this oversight.

Tuition agreements and infrastructure exist to support Vermont students attending K through 12 schools in New Hampshire. No comparable mechanism exists for Pre K. This statutory inconsistency permits out of state attendance for

K through 12 while denying access to Universal Pre K. This inconsistency was clearly not the intent of the Legislature.

The barrier I am describing is not philosophical. It is technical. Under Act 166, publicly funded Pre K is limited to prequalified programs. Prequalification requires compliance with Vermont specific systems, including participation in the Department for Children and Families STARS quality rating and the use of Vermont licensed early childhood educators. These requirements function appropriately within Vermont, but they cannot be met by otherwise high quality programs located just across the state line because those certifications and licenses are Vermont specific. For geographically isolated districts with no in-state options, this statutory structure has for nearly a decade actively barred access to publicly funded Pre K. My recommendation is a waiver at the local level to determine the child is in a Pre K desert and allow the current seamless tuition agreement structure where needed. Supervisory Unions already write checks to these schools for K-12 in most cases. It's a turn key solution.

I remind that our taxpayers have contributed to funding Universal Pre K access in other areas of the state for 10 years while some of ours went without.

Based on historic district level data, we estimate that an average of seven students per year in our region are directly impacted. In a small rural district, this number is significant and affects planning, staffing, budgeting, and educational outcomes.

Education does not operate in isolation. When Pre K access fails, the impacts extend beyond the classroom.

Education and Health

Early identification of learning disabilities, developmental delays, and social emotional needs is delayed or missed. These are not solely education issues. They are public health issues. Early intervention supports mental health, reduces later crisis responses, and improves long term outcomes. Lost early learning opportunities cannot be recovered.

Workforce

When families cannot access Pre K, parents are often forced to reduce work hours, leave employment, or decline job opportunities. This burden most often

falls on mothers. In regions already experiencing workforce shortages, lack of early childhood access directly limits labor participation and economic stability.

Education Finance and Taxpayer Impact

This statutory barrier also creates a serious budgeting challenge. When children cannot access Pre K, districts lose predictability about kindergarten enrollment and we don't know who to budget for. In practical terms, we have no idea how many kindergarten students will arrive because some never appeared in the system at the Pre K level. We may not even have birth data on students born out of state from birth to 5 years old or know they exist.

In the current funding environment, this uncertainty carries real financial risk. Districts have historically been penalized for exceeding excess spending thresholds, even when costs arise from late identified needs that could have been mitigated through early access. Districts are effectively penalized for circumstances they could not reasonably predict or prevent.

The burden of this volatility falls directly on taxpayers, many of whom in Essex County are elderly, on fixed incomes, or living in poverty. I am here to speak for the children and the taxpayers.

S.214 is not solely about access. It is about stability across interconnected systems. Early childhood access is one of the most effective tools available to reduce downstream education and health costs, support workforce participation, stabilize communities, and prevent avoidable budget penalties that increase per pupil costs.

I respectfully caution the Committee against delaying this fix by folding it into potential Act 73 changes. Large reform efforts are complex and slow moving. Children do not wait, families do not regain lost years, and narrow but critical fixes are often lost in large policy packages.

S.214 is a targeted and responsible correction. It aligns statute with legislative intent, reflects rural reality, and addresses a problem that is already well documented for over 10 years.

I strongly urge the Committee to advance S.214 this session and remove this inadvertent barrier so that Vermont's Universal Pre K system works as intended for children, families, communities, and taxpayers.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would like to thank the sponsor of this bill, Senator Kesha Ram Hinsdale, and give special thanks to Building Bright Futures for your painstaking work for future outcomes for all Vermont children including ours in this predicament.