

To: the Vermont Senate Committee on Education
3.10.26 1:15 PM regarding S214

Testimony of
Sharon Ellingwood
NEK Choice School Board Member

Testimony in Support of the Amendment to Vermont's Universal Pre Kindergarten Law

My name is Sharon Ellingwood, and I serve on the NEK Choice School District Board. I support the amendment to Vermont's Universal Pre Kindergarten law. I would like to thank Senator Kesha Ram Hinsdale, the bill's sponsor, along with the legislators, agencies, and partners who collaborated to bring forward this thoughtful solution.

On March 4th, state agency members managed to crisscross nearly the whole county for "Essex County for a Day," and the long miles between stops told the story better than any report could. Special thanks to CDD Deputy Commissioner Janet McLaughlin and AOE Deputy Secretary Jill Briggs Campbell for joining us. This amendment is a practical and efficient way to create access for students in areas of the NEK Choice School District.

For communities in the Northeast Kingdom Choice School District, this amendment addresses a real equity issue. Many of our towns exist in a true geographic childcare and school desert. In several communities, the only viable preschool programs for our Vermont children are across the Connecticut River in New Hampshire. Because Vermont's UPK funding cannot currently cross state lines, children in these towns are effectively excluded from access that other Vermont students receive.

When early milestones are not met, children and families suffer, school boards cannot accurately plan or budget, and elderly residents and taxpayers ultimately bear the cost when expensive late interventions drive up education spending.

Where local school capacity does not exist, school choice is not a luxury. It does not depopulate Vermont schools. It ensures that some Vermont children can still access an education.

Thank you for your attention and for your work on behalf of the lowest population density towns of Essex County. This amendment thoughtfully addresses the circumstances of districts like ours and reflects a broader understanding of the geographic realities faced by some of Vermont's most frontier communities.