



**VERMONT**

**DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES  
AGENCY OF EDUCATION**

**LEGISLATIVE REPORT**

# **JOINT REPORT ON ELEVATING THE STATUS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

**Act 76 of 2023**

**December 19, 2025**

**Issued by the Vermont Agency of Education  
and the Vermont Agency of Human Services**

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## Legislative Charge

[Act 76 of 2023](#) requires both the Agency of Education (AOE) and the Agency of Human Services Department of Children and Families (AHS/DCF) to submit plans to elevate the status of early childhood education within their respective agencies. The purpose is to achieve greater parity in decision-making authority, roles, and responsibilities related to early education and care across the two agencies.

## Executive Summary

Act 76 created the Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee (PEIC) to assist the state in improving and expanding accessible and high-quality prekindergarten education for all four-year old children on a full-day basis on or before July 1, 2026. The recommendations from the committee were to continue PreK for both three- and four-year olds, to expand hours and services for four-year olds, and to review and update the funding methodology. The findings from the Committee helped focus joint planning across state agencies and drove organizational changes to elevate the priority of early childhood education.

Co-chaired by the Deputy Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families and Secretary of Education, the PEIC engaged a broad cross-section of early childhood education stakeholders. The committee compared Vermont's policies to national best practices for high quality prekindergarten education. Additionally, and related to the scope of this report, the PEIC analyzed current organizational capacities with respect to data and shared oversight of prekindergarten education and how the changes proposed by Act 76 would impact the current system.

Findings from the PEIC affirmed Vermont's place as a national leader in prekindergarten access while identifying improvement priorities to achieve national standards related to coaching, professional development, and teacher preparation. The committee also noted several areas of inquiry intended to strengthen statewide capacity for data collection, instructional leadership, and monitoring. The major themes and associated capacity implications are listed below.

## Major Themes Related to State Capacity and Leadership

### 1. Streamlined Oversight and Governance

- a. There is a need for improved statutory alignment and clearer roles across prekindergarten and the early grades at state and district levels



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- b. Requires cross-sector coordination, data sharing, and strategic alignment to the state’s early childhood strategic plan with clear responsibility for access and quality

## **2. Data Systems and Monitoring**

- a. Improved data capacity is needed to assess quality and guide decisions
- b. Calls for improved and integrated monitoring systems, new data collection protocols and an evaluation of internal system and staff capacity needs

## **3. Quality**

- a. Vermont is close to meeting national benchmarks and could progress further with additional focus and supports
- b. Requires stronger statewide instructional leadership, targeted supports tied to child- and program-level data, and increased state and/or district resources to support workforce development

In response, the Agency of Education strengthened its instructional leadership capacity and elevated early childhood as a clear area of leadership focus. Specifically, the Agency of Education established a new Academics division to elevate instructional leadership statewide. This included creating several new positions, including Chief Academic Officer, Deputy Chief of Academics, and a State Director of Pre-Kindergarten Education. The Agency’s reorganization created a dedicated division for curriculum and instruction, expanded the Agency’s focus on special education, and positioned pre-kindergarten within a coherent prekindergarten through 12th grade continuum. This structural change has ensured that early childhood education is not treated as a stand-alone program but as an integral part of Vermont’s broader academic strategy and system of support for all learners.

At the same time, the Agency of Human Services has completed an assessment of its needs in accordance with Act 119 (2024) and has proposed the creation of an additional Deputy-level role to manage administrative and operational functions in the Department, allowing the DCF Commissioner and Child Development Division (CDD) Deputy Commissioner to prioritize focus on strategic priorities, including early childhood education. In addition, the Agency pointed to its successful implementation of Act 76 (2023) and the Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five among other initiatives as evidence of its ability provide meaningful leadership in this area. These actions reflect a shared commitment to build the organizational infrastructure necessary to improve teacher preparation, coaching, data systems, and governance—moving from fragmented efforts toward a more coherent, aligned statewide system for early childhood education. The agencies maintain a regular cadence of joint planning aligned with Building Bright Futures, which leads the state early childhood strategic plan. To further strengthen this alignment, the agencies have elevated their shared planning and collaboration. Prekindergarten will also be a central focus of several upcoming Agency of Education initiatives, particularly those aimed at enhancing data



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dashboards, reporting systems, and the ability to monitor program quality and outcomes statewide

## **Current State of Vermont's Universal Prekindergarten Program**

As part of Vermont's cradle-to-career vision, Vermont's Universal Prekindergarten program is jointly overseen by the Agency of Education and the Agency of Human Services Department for Children and Families and aims to provide high-quality pre-kindergarten education to each and every PreK-aged child in Vermont. Established in Act 166 of 2014, the Agency of Education and DCF's Child Development Division jointly monitor and evaluate all public and community-based prekindergarten education programs to promote optimal outcomes for children and to collect data to inform future decisions.

The jointly-chaired [Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee](#) issued a report in December 2024 that provides greater detail on the policy background and current context of Universal Prekindergarten in Vermont. The jointly issued Universal Prekindergarten Report 2024 provides data on enrollment, access, quality and expenditures.

## **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, as Vermont meets 7 out of 10 of the NIEER benchmark standards while also maintaining cost efficiency. 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. Please see [NIEER's State of Preschool 2024 Yearbook](#) and the state's Universal Prekindergarten Report 2024 for more detail.

## **Collaborative Approach at State and Local Levels**

Vermont's UPK system is designed to leverage strengths, expertise, and systems at both community and state levels. The Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee examined oversight of the current system and produced this [UPK Oversight Matrix](#) to detail the roles.



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At the community level, the program utilizes early childhood education capacity at schools, Head Start programs, center-based childcare programs, and family childcare programs that meet high quality standards; approximately 40% of universal prekindergarten education programs are in public schools and 60% in community-based or private settings. As outlined in Act 166 of 2014, school districts incorporate prekindergarten education into their school budgets and either offer prekindergarten directly, pay tuition to approved prekindergarten programs, or both. Districts have written agreements with approved prekindergarten programs aligned with the state standards set forth in [State Board of Education Rule Series 2600](#).

At the state level, the Agency of Education and the Department for Children and Families' Child Development Division teams work together to set policy, support implementation, monitor compliance, and improve practice in service to Vermont's youngest students.

### **Joint Oversight and Support**

AOE and CDD monitor for compliance with Act 166 and other state and federal regulations for over 400 public and private UPK programs, reviewing applications and annual assurance submissions and conducting ongoing monitoring through the state's [UPK Accountability and Continuous Improvement System \(ACIS\)](#). ACIS looks at the 11 compliance indicators of Act 166, including Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act of 2004, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the State of Vermont Special Education Rules as well as needs and priorities.

The agencies take a complementary and comprehensive approach to evaluating quality and focusing on continuous improvement. Together, CDD and AOE support system-level conditions, the classroom environment, workforce development, social, emotional, behavioral, and academic indicators, as well as targeted support for teachers.

CDD monitors UPK prequalified programs for compliance with childcare licensing regulations and the STARS quality system. Childcare licensing monitors for foundational health and safety standards to ensure a developmentally appropriate environment to young children across all UPK settings; this system includes regular on-site monitoring and a public-facing database. STARS recognizes childcare, preschool, and afterschool programs that demonstrate quality within three key domains: Adult-Child Interactions, Family and Youth Engagement, and Responsive Practices. This includes external quality assessments using a national research-based evaluation tool conducted by trained, reliable assessors, as well as quality coaching through companion SPARQS program. The Vermont Early Learning Standards are incorporated into the STARS framework as well as childcare licensing.



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AOE monitors the licensed AOE Licensed Educator with an ECE/ECSE endorsement, Vermont Early Learning Standards, student-level assessment (TS GOLD), Act 166 administrative rules, and IDEA and the Vermont State Special Education Rules compliance including suspension and expulsions (16 V.S.A. § 1162 and Rule 4500). To support learning in academics, social, emotional, and behavioral areas, the AOE monitors the alignment of curriculum with the Vermont Early Learning Standards. Alignment ensure children are receiving developmentally appropriate experiences that build a strong foundation for future school success and lifelong learning. This promotes equity by providing a shared vision of what children should know and be able to do.

Teaching Strategies Gold (TS GOLD®) is an authentic, observation-based assessment system designed to monitor the growth and development of children from birth through kindergarten. In Vermont, TS GOLD® is a key component of the state's Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program and is the state approved developmental child assessment for all UPK prequalified programs. The AOE monitors the use and outcomes of the Teaching Strategies GOLD (TS GOLD) assessment system. At the state level, the aggregated data provides accountability information and helps the AOE determine overall effectiveness of the program and identify areas for improvement in curriculum and support.

The AOE also tracks the occurrence of exclusionary discipline practices and Rule 4500 Restraint and Seclusion in UPK programs. The use of this data can help inform the need for professional development and the need for proactive, positive, preventative interventions and universal supports through early multi-tiered systems of support. CDD and AOE collaborate closely on the transition of children from Early Intervention (IDEA Part C, co-led by CDD) to Early Childhood Special Education (IDEA Part B 619, led by AOE) through bi-weekly meetings, joint professional development, and work groups on EI and ECSE topics.

The agencies coordinate to review childcare licensing incident reports and other data for compliance. Co-investigations may include on-site visits, in-person or virtual interviews, and other forms of communication. CDD and AOE also coordinate to provide complementary support, guidance, and professional development to UPK program leaders and staff. Both agencies offer professional development, technical assistance and coaching designed to support individual UPK programs' continuous quality improvement. For example, AOE focuses on Early MTSS (Multi-tiered System of Supports), ensuring programmatic quality implementation of evidence-based practices and desired child outcomes. CDD supports individual professional development in alignment with national developmentally appropriate practice standards through Northern Lights at the Community College of Vermont. AOE and CDD also lean into their respective expertise related to collaboration with Head Start programs (CDD lead via its Head Start Collaboration Office) or Data Systems (AOE lead via its student-level data systems).



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## System Challenges

Even with these successes, Vermont's UPK system faces ongoing challenges that limit its efficiency and coherence and are an area of focus as the state explores program expansion. Overlapping statutory and regulatory obligations between AOE, CDD, and School Districts can create ambiguity in authority and reporting, at times creating duplicative efforts that can be burdensome to programs. Programs sometimes have to meet similar requirements for different entities, which can be complex and inefficient when not properly aligned. For example, there are several quality standards within the UPK system. Public school-based UPK programs, which make up approximately 40% of all universal prekindergarten education programs, adhere to AOE's Education Quality Standards (EQS). EQS are a broad set of rules (Rule Series 2000) that define what a high-quality education should look like for all students in Vermont's public schools. Their primary purpose is to ensure that all Vermont children are afforded educational opportunities that are substantially equal in quality and enable them to achieve or exceed rigorous performance standards. All UPK programs must also comply with Vermont's STARS quality system (Vermont's quality rating and improvement system described above) for early childhood education settings and supports Vermont in meeting the NIEER standards for high-quality prekindergarten education. Head Start programs must meet national Head Start Program and Performance Standards which require evidence and reporting similar to but distinct from state UPK requirements. Navigating these high-level quality frameworks can consume resources that could otherwise be focused on child instruction if not explicitly aligned.

Similarly, the absence of an integrated data system hinders the ability to connect program participation, dosage, and quality to child outcomes and focus program improvement efforts. Finally, the current statewide funding methodology for prekindergarten education has not accurately reflected the actual cost of high-quality programming, creating inequities across settings; for example, the UPK tuition rate has not had its methodology updated in nearly a decade and individual school districts investments in school-based programs vary significantly. **It should be noted that, reflecting the urgency of this issue, the Scott Administration put forward a proposal during the 2025 legislative session to increase Pre-K funding through a weighted foundation formula and improve support for prekindergarten coordination.**

At the local level, engagement between school districts and community-based programs varies widely, resulting in inconsistent administrative standards and supports, which impact child and family experiences. In addition, school districts vary significantly in what amount of prekindergarten education they provide directly, ranging from none to a full-school-day, full-school-year program, making it more complicated to evaluate program offerings.



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The elevation of prekindergarten across AOE and AHS represents an intentional effort to maximize resources, reduce silos, and build an integrated, coherent system that supports quality from birth through the early grades. However, leadership changes alone are not sufficient to address the system’s challenges. Lasting progress will require intentional design of the entire education system—with the right expertise and support at the state level, district level, and within UPK classrooms. Greater standardization and clearer guardrails are needed to manage system complexity, especially given the variation in district staffing and the challenges related to funding and coordination. As the state considers broader structural changes, early childhood education leaders at both agencies are prioritizing data reporting and accountability to strengthen visibility into program quality and drive continuous improvement.

## **Elevating Early Childhood Leadership Within Agencies**

Both the Agency of Education and the Agency of Human Services have undertaken organizational change efforts to elevate early education within their leadership structures and ensure it is integrated into high level decision-making processes.

### **Agency of Education Elevation Plan**

To meet the evolving needs of the Vermont education system and elevate early childhood education as a priority, the Agency recently adapted its organizational structure. The reorganization was designed to strengthen instructional leadership, promote coherence across programs, and improve system-wide accountability. A key feature of the reorganization is the intentional focus on promoting alignment from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade by leveraging the diverse expertise across the Agency to deliver a unified focus on academic excellence.

The Agency established a new executive leadership position and subsequently hired the Chief Academic Officer to strengthen statewide efforts to improve academic quality and advance educational equity across Vermont. The Chief Academics Officer oversees the area of Academics, which includes:

- A newly created division for Curriculum and Instruction focused on standards, high-quality instructional materials, evidence-based instructional practices, professional learning, and assessment practices,
- An expanded and elevated Special Education Division to bolster the AOE’s capacity for differentiated monitoring, instructional guidance, and technical assistance to districts, schools PreK through 12th grade, and early education providers,
- The School Improvement Division with a renewed focus on evidence-based supports, turnaround strategies, and continuous improvement systems, and



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- The Education Programs Division which houses early education and oversees statewide program implementation, including monitoring and tracking readiness to enter Kindergarten and other critical transition year.

The AOE's new structure is designed to promote coherence across standards, instruction, assessments, special education and accountability from pre-K through 12th grade. The Chief Academic Officer position reports directly to the Secretary of Education and ensures that early education is represented in statewide academic strategy and decision making. As part of the Secretary's Executive Cabinet, the Chief Academic Officer provides parity with the CDD's Deputy Commissioner, strengthening cross-agency coordination.

To further elevate early childhood education, the AOE created a State Director of Prekindergarten position. This position serves as part of the Secretary's Extended Cabinet to ensure that early childhood learning has a consistent voice in Agency-wide governance. The position focuses on expanding access to pre-k, improving curriculum and instructional support, and developing tools to support and evaluate learning progress and readiness at critical transition points.

The AOE is also prioritizing alignment of special education monitoring and support **through the restructuring and improved intra-division coordination**. This includes advancing data quality, reporting, and accountability through improving dashboards and data collection protocols, and a monitoring cycle tied to continuous improvement. These efforts directly support the Academic Excellence pillar of the AOE's strategic plan, particularly the focus on Kindergarten readiness, instructional quality across the PreK–12 spectrum, and access to a high-quality teacher.

### Agency of Human Services/DCF Elevation Plan

Within the Agency of Human Services larger plan for reenvisioning the Agency, developed in accordance with Act 119 (2024), the Department proposes the creation of a Deputy-at-Large or Chief Operating Officer position to oversee operational and administrative functions, expanding the Commissioner's capacity to focus on strategic priorities, including early childhood education. Both the DCF Commissioner and the Deputy Commissioner for CDD will therefore be positioned to concentrate more fully on advancing early childhood strategy at the statewide level rather than managing day-to-day operations. The Division's recent success at implementing the expansive changes from Act 76, co-chairing the Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee, providing leadership to the Early Childhood State Advisory Council, and administering the interagency Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five point to its ability to provide leadership on early childhood in the state without major structural changes. Additional



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information on the research and rationale related to DCF, its structure, and responsiveness to Vermonters is in the [Act 119 report](#).

## Leadership Structure and Key Priorities

The Secretary of the Agency of Human Services and Commissioner of the Department for Children and Families empower the DCF Deputy Commissioner overseeing the Child Development Division to set strategy and represent the Agency in all high-level decision-making related to UPK; she will consult with the AHS Secretary and DCF Commissioner as needed.

Likewise, the Secretary of Education empowers the Chief Academic Officer to set strategy and represent the agency in all high-level decision-making relate to UPK; she will consult with the AOE Secretary as needed.

## Upcoming Interagency Pre-K Collaboration

With key structural leadership questions addressed, the Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee report concluded, and Education Transformation work underway, both Agencies are committed to additional analysis of the roles and responsibilities of each team.

In preparing its recent application for the federal Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five Systems-Building Grant (PDGB-5), Vermont proposed an interagency alignment process to strengthen Universal Prekindergarten. Four core components will shape that work:

- **Clarify and align UPK governance and expectations across agencies and settings** so public schools, community-based programs, family childcare, and Head State partners operate within a coherent statewide framework.
- **Reduce administrative burden and duplication** by identifying and addressing unnecessary differences in oversight, monitoring, and reporting.
- **Improve access** by ensuring UPK policies and supports work consistently for families in every region and across program types.
- **Shared UPK data governance and integration** so Vermont can track participation, quality, and outcomes using consistent definitions and efficient processes.

An interagency team will guide the strategy and implementation of this project, to be supported by an outside consultant if funded by PDGB-5. Phase 1 includes building a shared understanding and stakeholder grounding. The consultant will support CDD, AOE, and Building Bright Futures, home of the state's early childhood state advisory



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council, to document a clear baseline of how UPK currently operates across settings, governance, monitoring, funding flows, and data systems. A Steering Committee will validate the baseline findings and refine project priorities through structured, cross-sector engagement; membership will include statewide and local leaders from school districts, community-based and home-based childcare programs, and Head Start, including Special Education Directors, Early Childhood Special Education Educators, and Related Service Providers. The project team will also review current UPK stakeholder engagement structures and develop a proposal for ongoing engagement that strengthens or integrates existing mechanisms, so stakeholder input is consistently incorporated into long-term governance.

Phase 2 includes a joint analysis and alignment design. The interagency team will tackle joint analysis of system gaps and ambiguities, helping identify regulatory distinctions, overlapping oversight responsibilities, variation in district and program roles, and inconsistencies in monitoring create fragmentation or uneven access. This phase will also review UPK funding mechanisms and the operational implications. In parallel, with BBF as co-lead of the data mapping and linking work, the Agencies will map the UPK data system to identify critical shared data elements and design improved cross-agency collection, validation, and analysis processes.

Building on Phase 2 findings, Phase 3 includes partners building a cohesive set of interagency recommendations and a phased pathway for implementation beyond the project year. This pathway will cover governance and role alignment, clarity of support and monitoring functions, funding/administrative clarity, and UPK data integration steps that are feasible for state and local partners. While this project will require significant staff time from CDD and AOE, both organizations are committed to this workplan with Secretary-level buy-in to address longstanding implementation concerns. Through this focused process, Vermont will strengthen UPK as a core pillar of its cradle-to-career system, improve consistency for providers and districts, enhance family access, and lay durable foundation for children's development and learning.

## **Alignment with Vermont Act 73 Education Transformation**

Through our Agencies' partnership on UPK implementation, the Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee, and discussions related to Vermont's Education Transformation overall, we've identified several barriers to fully realizing the promise of Universal Prekindergarten that 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



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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.

### Enhanced District-Level Coordination and Support

The focus of Act 73 on system coherence can lead to a more unified approach to delivering prekindergarten education by clarifying the role of school districts in administering Universal PreK. Larger districts are better able to consistently support UPK coordination due to staff capacity, allowing for more consistent implementation of programs and practices across settings within the district. This approach builds on the recommendations of the Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee and lessons learned from supervisory unions or school districts that currently use regional approach to UPK with a dedicated staff person that report more efficient administration, improved coordination with families, and enhanced PreK to K transitions. The larger school districts envisioned in Act 73 will allow this model to spread statewide and could serve to improve access to prekindergarten education through community-wide planning, support quality and inclusion, and ensure alignment with district and state educational goals. Districts can improve data collection and reporting processes, providing more accurate and comprehensive data on UPK enrollment, quality, and outcomes. This data can inform decision-making at both the district and state levels.

### Resource Allocation

The foundation formula proposed through Act 73 will provide a mechanism for updating Vermont's prekindergarten education funding model to better reflect the true cost of high-quality early education and support expansion over time. **Special attention is needed to ensure that expanded access and hours for prekindergarten students are included as inputs and criteria for evaluating the adequacy of that formula.** The foundation formula also sets stage to update the methodology for the statewide UPK tuition rate to address disparities in resources between school-based and community-based programs, especially for those programs serving students who need additional supports to be safely and successfully included in prekindergarten. Larger districts may also have more streamlined processes for allocating resources, potentially leading to more equitable distribution of funding and support for UPK programs. In addition, larger districts can streamline collaboration between state government and



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local educational agencies. This can improve the alignment of policies and practices across different levels of governance.

### **Improved and More Consistent Educational Quality**

With increased focus on and resources for leadership on Universal Prekindergarten, districts will be better able to support and facilitate high-quality instruction across all UPK settings and target specialized supports to children and programs that need them, including a specific emphasis on early childhood special education (ECSE) to ensure districts have the capacity to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities. Districts can also play a key role in organizing and providing professional development opportunities for UPK educators, both training and coaching, to ensure they are equipped with using evidence-based practices and the knowledge to support learning and development for prekindergarten students. This professional development should include training on inclusion best practices, early identification and referral procedures for special education services, and effective collaborative teaching models that integrate ECSE specialists and general education teachers.

### **Conclusion**

The Agency of Education and the Department for Children and Families are committed to Universal Prekindergarten education as core component of Vermont's cradle-to-career vision education system. The establishment of a shared leadership structure with decision making, paired with aligned policy and data priorities will help support shared accountability and sustained collaboration across agencies.

As Vermont advances the reforms outlined in Act 73 while strengthening the Agencies' prekindergarten partnership, the state is positioned to sustain a universally high-quality early education system that meets the needs of each and every child and family. With continued partnership, Vermont stands ready to continue to serve as a national model for prekindergarten education and advance the goal: that every child, regardless of setting, enters kindergarten ready to thrive in schools that are equally prepared to receive and build upon their foundation.

