Date: February 24, 2025
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: Linda Michniewicz, Building Bright Futures Regional Manager for Caledonia/Southern Essex and Orleans/Northern Essex
Re: Equitable Access to Pre-K for Families and Children Living in Rural Communities

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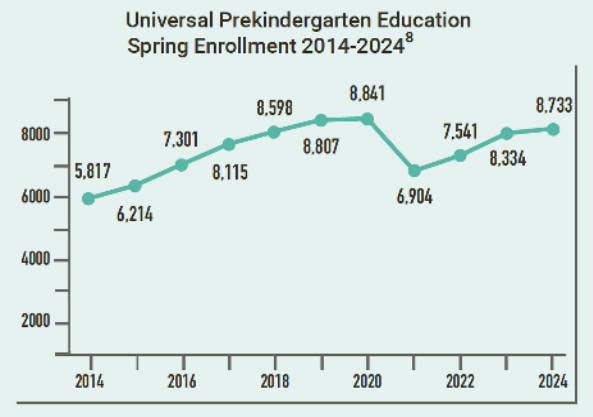
My name is Linda Michniewicz, I am the Building Bright Futures Regional Manager for Caledonia/Southern Essex and Orleans/Northern Essex Regional Councils. It is in carrying out BBF's mission to improve the well being of children and families in Vermont and fulfilling our charge to monitor the vision and strategic plan for Vermont's early childhood system and advise the Governor and legislature on the status of children, that I submit this testimony regarding lack of access to pre kindergarten education for three- and four-year-olds in Essex County. Many families in the north east corner of the state live close to prekindergarten programs in New Hampshire, but are unable to access those programs despite facing long drives to the nearest program in Vermont.

BBF's mission: To improve the well-being of children and families in Vermont by using evidence to inform policy and bringing voices together across sectors and within regions to discuss critical challenges and problem-solve.

> Building Bright Futures State Advisory Council (SAC) does not directly lobby for or oppose any specific bill or action discussed within the legislature or legislatively appointed committee. Our role is to convene and elevate the voices of families and early childhood partners, monitor the system by identifying high-quality up-to-date data, and synthesize this information to advise decision-makers.

Data snapshot on Prekindergarten Education in Vermont



Enrollment: Overall we've seen an increase over time in pre-K program enrollment. Most recent data reflects approximately 8,700 children in Vermont participating in universal pre-K. UPK enrollment has recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

Access: Vermont also consistently ranks 2nd in the country for having the highest access for 3-years for universal pre-K, and has been in this position since 2017. Vermont has ranked sixth for 4-year-olds in access to UPK

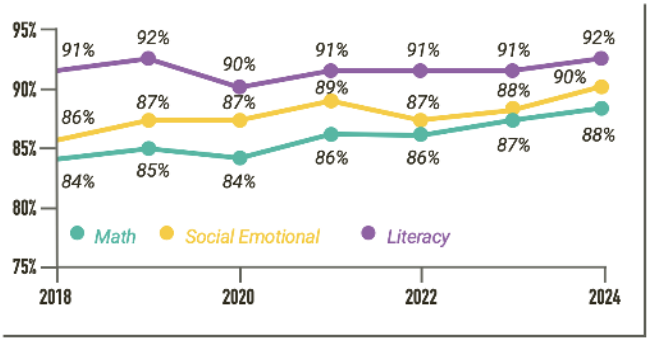
Child Outcomes: Child outcomes are critical to review right now as we're thinking about changes to the system. Quantitative and qualitative data illustrate that there are some things that are not working for children, families, and programs that need to be strengthened. As we consider the best ways to expand the program, it is important to target the components that aren't working well, without changing or sacrificing the elements that are working well.

- Readiness for Kindergarten: Children who attended a pre-K program before entering kindergarten had higher rates of readiness for kindergarten than those who did not attend. In the fall of 2023, 85% of students were identified as ready for kindergarten. Children who attended a publicly funded pre-K were more likely to be

ready (87%) than those who did not (79%).[1]

- Social Emotional Development & Math: There has been an increasing trend for 4-year-olds meeting or exceeding expectations for math and social emotional development in the spring of each year, while literacy has remained relatively steady over the same time period. [2]
- Benefit from length of access: Research shows us that two years of access to pre-K is beneficial for child development outcomes, particularly as we're looking to ensure our children are prepared to enter kindergarten.[3]

Figure 18: 4-Year-Olds Meeting/Exceeding Expectations for Social, Emotional, Literacy & Math Assessments[15]



Outcome and Final Report of PreKindergarten Education Implementation Committee (PEIC): The final PEIC Report, submitted on December 6, named four key recommendations that resulted from the committee's work. These recommendations include:

1. Maintaining the current prekindergarten benefit for 3-year-olds
2. Expanding access for 4-year-olds
3. Commissioning an analysis of Vermont's pupil weight for prekindergarten
4. Reviewing methodology for establishing prekindergarten payments to non-school-based programs and proposing updates

Regional Context

In Essex County, it is challenging, if not impossible, for 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds to access prekindergarten education. The NEK Choice School District includes the towns of Nortin, Averill, Lewis, Lemington, Bloomfield, Brunswick, Ferdinand, Maidstone, East Haven, Granby, Guildhall, Victory, Kirby and Warren's Gore and Avery's Gore. This is a 100% non operating district with 100% school choice. Due to geographic proximity, most of the school aged children in these towns attend New Hampshire public schools. Tuition agreements and infrastructure are in place to support K-12 attendance of Vermont residents in New Hampshire schools. No such agreements exist for pre-K.

[1] Vermont's Early Childhood Data & Policy Center at Building Bright Futures. (2025). The State of Vermont's Children: 2024 Year in Review. Building Bright Futures: Williston, VT.
Retrieved from www.buildingbrightfutures.org/data-page/state-of-vermonts-children/
[2] Vermont's Early Childhood Data & Policy Center at Building Bright Futures. (2025). The State of Vermont's Children: 2024 Year in Review. Building Bright Futures: Williston, VT.
Retrieved from www.buildingbrightfutures.org/data-page/state-of-vermonts-children/
[3] National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). (2024). State of Preschool: 2023 Yearbook. Retrieved from https://nieer.org/yearbook/2023/executive-summary#:~:text=Access%20for%203%2Dyear%2Dolds,outside%20of%20preschool%20special%20education.

Equity Concerns:

- Families from this area may resort to paying full tuition for early care and education to New Hampshire Programs in order to access pre-K.
- Not all families can afford private pay especially in this area of the state with higher poverty rates.
- To participate in the few programs located in this area, many families would need to drive in the opposite direction from their worksites.

School Impact & Data Concerns:

- When children do not have access to pre-K, elementary schools are unable to identify and offer supports that would assist children with disabilities in school readiness.
- Missing these early intervention years brings a cost to our taxpayers in an area with high poverty.

The State Advisory Council Network's 2025 Policy Recommendations Related to Pre-K

On November. 4, 2024, the State Advisory Council (SAC) formally endorsed the Policy Recommendations of the Vermont Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network for 2025. These annual recommendations represent the most pressing and actionable priorities for early childhood stakeholders throughout the Building Bright Futures Network. The State Advisory Council (SAC) is Vermont's Governor-appointed, primary advisory body on the well-being of children from the prenatal period through age 8 and their families. In partnership with Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP) Committees and the Regional Councils, the SAC sets priorities and strategic direction for statewide initiatives using the VECAP and up-to-date data. The annual recommendations are developed with input across all BBF Network gatherings and seek to identify the current gaps and needs in policy, promote action in strategic areas for the coming year, ensure recommendations are measurable, and move Vermont toward a more equitable early childhood system. Below are the 2025 recommendations endorsed by the State Advisory Council related to Vermont's universal pre-K program.

Monitor to Ensure Equitable Access for All 3- & 4-Year-Olds in Vermont's Universal Pre-K Program

- Ensure Vermont's Universal Prekindergarten Education (UPK) program continues to lead the country by maintaining universal access for 3- and 4-year-olds in a mixed-delivery system (school-based, center-based, and home-based programs) and centering the developmental needs of young children and their families. *Renewed Policy Recommendation (2022, 2023)*
- Task the Agency of Education, Child Development Division, and Building Bright Futures to create, implement, and update as necessary a monitoring and accountability protocol to better monitor Vermont's Universal Prekindergarten Education (UPK), including robust data collection and analysis. The development of the process should include feedback from impacted communities and individuals (families, educators, Act 166 Coordinators, the Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee, preK–12 administrators, etc.) and should be mindful of the additional capacity and skills reporting this data requires from programs. Collected data should include financial information, enrollment by student characteristics, staffing, and student outcomes.
- Secure sustained funding for personnel across all three entities to ensure high-quality data through the following activities: data management and reporting activities, training and TA to support quality collection and reporting, engagement in data integration meetings and visioning, data analysis, and making data publicly available.

- Examine how best to provide a continuity of pre-K and related services for children in rural regions and border regions, some of whom go on to attend kindergarten in bordering states (*2024 SAC Policy Recommendation*)

What the SAC's Policy Recommendations Mean Related to Pre-K

Vermont is seen as a national leader for its mixed-delivery pre-K program for children 3, 4, and 5 years of age not yet enrolled in kindergarten. As of 2023, the state ranked sixth in the country for access for 4-year-olds and second for access for 3-year-olds. During the 2022-2023 school year, universal pre-K enrollment was at 8,334. In June 2024, 42% of capacity for universal pre-K children was in school-based programs and 58% in private programs. It is a significant issue of equity that this is not the reality for children in the state's most rural county.

The BBF Network sees it as critical to continue our state's commitment to serving both 3- and 4-year-olds in the program and maintaining the program's mixed-delivery model, which aligns with national best practices and meets the varied needs of children and families. In addition to this commitment, increased resources and capacity are needed to build out a more robust system for monitoring and data collection work to understand and track over time key characteristics of the program, such as student outcomes, staffing, and student characteristics in order to ensure equitable access and program efficacy.

Why these Recommendations Matter for UPK in Vermont

Based on the experiences of families, early educators, and young children, the current universal pre-K system has many strengths to continue leaning into, especially its mixed-delivery model, which centers the developmental and varied needs of young children and families. It is our hope that with your help, we can address this barrier to access and equity, the inability of families to access pre-K dollars to attend pre-K programs in New Hampshire, even if these programs are the only programs that families can reasonably access and where these children will attend kindergarten.