

# PreKindergarten Education Implementation Committee

## Report to the Legislature: Draft 2

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# PREKINDERGARTEN EDUCATION IMPLEMENTATION COMMITTEE

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The Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee (Committee) was created through [Act 76](#) to assist the Agency of Education in improving and expanding accessible, affordable, and high-quality prekindergarten education for all four-year-old children on a full-day basis on or before July 1, 2026.

## Powers and Duties

The Committee was charged with examining the delivery of prekindergarten education in Vermont and making recommendations to expand access for children through the public school system or private providers under contract with the school district, or both. This included making recommendations on the changes necessary to provide prekindergarten education to all children by or through the public school system on or before July 1, 2026, including transitioning children who are three years of age from the 10-hour prekindergarten benefit to child care and early education.

As part of its recommendations, the Committee was charged to consider:

1. The needs of both the State & local education agencies (LEAs);
2. The minimum number of hours that shall constitute a full school day for both prekindergarten & Kindergarten;
3. Whether there are areas of the State where prekindergarten education can be more effectively & conveniently furnished in an adjacent state due to geographic considerations;
4. Benchmarks & best practices to ensure high-quality prekindergarten education;
5. Measures to ensure capacity is available to meet the demand for prekindergarten education;
6. Special education services for children participating in prekindergarten in public & private settings;
7. Any necessary infrastructure changes to expand prekindergarten;
8. Costs associated with expanding prekindergarten, including fiscally strategic options to sustain an expansion;
9. Recommendations for the oversight of the prekindergarten system; and
10. Any other issue the Committee deems relevant.

## Membership

The Committee was composed of the following members:

- Zoie Saunders, interim Secretary of Education, served as co-chair;
- Janet McLaughlin, Deputy Commissioner of the Child Development Division, served as co-chair;
- Sandra Cameron, Associate Executive Director of the Vermont School Board Association;
- Sherry Carlson, Executive Officer of Let's Grow Kids;
- Dr. Morgan Crossman, Executive Director of Building Bright Futures;

- Jeff Francis, formerly Executive Director of the Vermont Superintendents Association;
- Sharron Harrington, Executive Director of the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children;
- Korinne Harvey, Family representative with a prekindergarten-age child when the Committee initially convenes (appointed by the Building Bright Futures Council);
- Renee Kelly, Head Start Collaboration Office Director;
- Mary Lundeen, Executive Director of the Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators;
- Erica McLaughlin, Assistant Executive Director of the Vermont Principals' Association;
- Nicole Miller, Executive Director of Vermont Afterschool, Inc.;
- Jeffrey O'Hara, Representative of a prequalified private provider operating a licensed center-based child care and preschool program (appointed by the Speaker of the House);
- Theresa Pollner, Designee of the Vermont Curriculum Leaders Association;
- Sheila Quenneville, Representative of a prequalified private provider providing prekindergarten education at a regulated family child care home (appointed by the Committee on Committees);
- Colin Robinson, Political Director of the Vermont National Education Association;
- Rebecca Webb, Regional Prekindergarten Coordinator (appointed by the Vermont Principals' Association); and
- Chris Wells, Family representative with a child three years of age or younger when the Committee initially convenes (appointed by the Building Bright Futures Council).

The Law stipulated that the committee include a member of the School Construction Aid Task Force to be appointed by the Secretary of Education. This member position was not filled.

There were several transitions in committee membership:

- Zoie Saunders assumed the co-chair role on behalf of AOE in September, 2024. Heather Bouchey was the co-chair when the committee launched in July, 2023 and designated Meg Porcella and Ann Bordonaro to serve on behalf of AOE before Zoie Saunders assumed the co-chair.
- Donna Brown served as the Head Start designee while Renee Kelley was on leave from July through October, 2024.
- Mary Lundeen replaced Pam Reed as the designee of the Vermont Council of Special Education starting in September, 2024.

The Committee brought together members with a range of perspectives, experiences, and stakes in prekindergarten education, some of whom volunteered their time and scaled professional and logistical hurdles to participate.

This composition required the committee to focus most of its time getting up to speed on the complex history, policy and intersecting systems related to prekindergarten education. It allowed

for rich conversation, shared learning and new perspectives to emerge, but did not result in a detailed implementation plan or specific legislative language. As outlined in the Recommendations section, those will require focused time from a small, committed, policy-focused working group to deliver.

**Process**

Committee members met monthly from July, 2023 through November, 2024. Meetings were 90-minutes and conducted virtually on Teams, with the exception of September 10, 2024, when the Committee met for three hours in-person to review and discuss the draft recommendations. All meeting information is posted on the [Agency of Education’s website](#).

The Agency of Education retained Molly Loomis, PhD of [Moloco LLC](#) from December, 2023 through November, 2024 to assist with process planning, meeting facilitation, data synthesis and report writing. A Planning Team, including the committee co-chairs, AOE representative Meg Porcella and facilitator Molly Loomis, met monthly to plan agendas, track progress, synthesize information, and draft the report.

In addition to attending monthly Committee meetings, each Committee member participated in a Workgroup that met for 90-minutes monthly from February - June, 2023. Workgroup focused on one of three topic areas: 1) considerations related to program quality, 2) system-level considerations, and 3) considerations related to capacity and funding. Workgroup members explored data, information, and feedback related to their topic areas and [reported monthly](#) to the full Committee about their work. Workgroup conversations and analysis were captured variously through spreadsheets, matrices, and minutes posted on the [Agency of Education’s website](#) and synthesized in the report below.

**Constituent Engagement**

The Committee was not tasked with extensive community engagement. However, committee members gathered feedback from their constituencies in a variety of ways, which are summarized in the table below.

**Table 1: Constituent Groups & Engagement Strategies**

Constituent Group	Individuals Engaged	Committee Lead	Recruitment Strategy	Engagement Protocol
Prek teachers in Public Schools	25	Colin Robinson	VTNEA Listserv	Online Survey
Prek teachers in private settings	4	Becca Webb	PEIC Members	Group Interview Protocol

UPK Coordinators	<b>28</b>	Becca Webb	Standing Meeting	Group Interview Protocol
Principals	<b>62</b>	Erica McLaughlin	VPA Listserv	Online Survey
Superintendents	<b>9</b>	Jeff Francis	Standing Meeting	Facilitated Conversation
Superintendents	<b>42</b>	Zoie Saunders	AOE Liserv	Online Survey
School Board Members	<b>13</b>	Sandra Cameron	VSBA Listserv	Online Survey
Leaders from AOE, CDD, AHS & Gov. Office	<b>9</b>	Janet McLaughlin	Invitation	Group Interview Protocol
Head Start Constituents	<b>8</b>	Renee Kelly	Standing Meeting	Facilitated Group Interview
Special Education Constituents	<b>8</b>	Molly Loomis	Invitation to agency experts & constituents	2 Facilitated Conversations
Adjacent State Constituents	<b>4</b>	Becca Webb	Convening of Essex County constituents	Facilitated Conversation

In addition to these constituent engagement activities, members were invited to review constituent feedback and data collected prior to the Committee’s launch by Building Bright Futures, whose role in state statute includes elevating family and community voice, and monitoring Vermont’s early childhood system by identifying and providing high-quality up-to-date data to inform policy and decision-making. This work includes collaboratively monitoring and evaluating UPK alongside the Child Development Division and the Agency of Education. Building Bright Futures submitted the following data, constituent feedback, and legislative testimony/memos summarizing significant existing work on documenting the current status of UPK in Vermont alongside questions and concerns on behalf of communities statewide:

- [Vermont Universal Prekindergarten Education \(UPK\) Data, Publications, Reports, and Resources](#), Updated November 2024: Compilation of most recent data, stakeholder feedback, publications (State and national), and partner testimony on UPK in Vermont.
- [S.56 Stakeholder Feedback](#): This document captured invested party feedback on the policies and priorities originally proposed in S.56. Much of the feedback was related to UPK and a mixed delivery model and was presented in the House Committee on Human Services, the Senate Committee on Health and Welfare, the Senate Committee on Education, and the House Committee on Education.
- [Data Needed to Inform Decision-making](#): This document outlined the questions/data that would be important to have to inform decision-making on the future of UPK, originally presented to the Senate Committee on Education.
- [BBF's Universal Prekindergarten \(UPK\) Webinar on results from Statewide Data Collection on Successes and Challenges in UPK & Testimony on the findings of Building Bright Futures' information gathering effort on Universal Prekindergarten \(UPK\)](#): 13 in-person focus groups were held statewide including 199 participants from 26 unique sectors and an electronic feedback form captured data from over 169 participants from over 26 sectors. The purpose of this information gathering effort was to utilize BBF's statewide and regional networks to ask those directly impacted by Act 166 to identify perceptions of success, where and why it's been successful and to share best practices, also outline persistent barriers to successful UPK administration and implementation.
- [Memo submitted to the Senate Committee on Education](#): This memo provided an overview of what information and data should be reviewed and discussed in order to improve UPK.
- [Memo submitted to the Senate Committee on Health and Welfare](#): This memo provided concrete guidance on the importance of compiling critical data and determining the cost of expanding/adapting UPK before convening a study committee and called attention to the lack of unified vision for UPK policy and the time frame associated with convening a study committee.
- [Memo submitted to the House Committee on Education](#): This memo included considerations for data-driven decision-making in UPK, preliminary themes resulting from stakeholder feedback on S.56/H.208 captured from February 2023, and outlining existing data, publications, reports and resources on UPK.
- [The Vermont Early Childhood Strategic Plan Committee's Early Learning and Development's February 2023 Meeting on Pre-K](#). In February, the Early Learning and Development Committee Meeting held a discussion with Prekindergacoordinators and partners about potential impacts of the bill (S. 56/H. 208) during their February meeting
- [Vermont Early Care and Education Financing Study \(RAND Report\)](#): This report, required by Act 45 of 2021, includes financial estimates on the cost of restructuring the state's Child Care Financial Assistance Program and funding options to support an increased state investment in early childhood education
- [The Vermont Child Care and Early Childhood Education Systems Analysis Final Report](#): This report, required by Act 45 of 2021, includes a set of recommendations for how the

state might improve its early childhood governance, with specific steps state policymakers should consider taking.

Additionally, consistent with Vermont Public Meeting Law requirements, time for public comment was directly allocated and announced at each meeting, and members of the public were encouraged to share written feedback on all aspects of the Committee work throughout the process. Written feedback was posted on the [PEIC website](#) and reviewed by Committee members.

## **Report**

This report integrates workgroup findings, constituent feedback, data analysis and member input to inform the analysis and recommendations below. It is organized into the following sections:

1. *Influences on the Committee Process*. This section reviews the history, changing political and fiscal landscape, committee tensions and resources that impacted how the committee approached its charge and arrived at the recommendations in this report.
2. *Best Practices in Prekindergarten Education*. This section reviews national research and benchmarks for best practices in prekindergarten education. It uses this research to highlight Vermont's current successes and areas for improvement.
3. *Changes Proposed by Act 76*. This section is organized by the four key changes to prekindergarten education that are outlined in Section 2 of Act 76. It includes a description of the implications of each change and recommendations for implementation.
4. *Recommendations*. This section provides a high-level list of recommendations about the best next steps for expanding access to prekindergarten.

The Planning Team drafted the first draft of the report in August, 2024 for the full Committee to review and discuss in-person in September. Feedback from committee members was collected through in-person discussion and through individual written submission and integrated into a second draft that was reviewed by the Committee in November. The Planning Team made final edits to submit to the House Committees on Education and on Human Services and the Senate Committees on Education and on Health and Welfare.

## INFLUENCES ON THE COMMITTEE PROCESS

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The Committee's charge and process were influenced by a complex and changing landscape in state government, education finance, and public policy. The following describes the history and factors that impacted how and what the Committee was able to achieve due to these influences.

### Prekindergarten in Vermont

In 2007, Act 62 expanded publicly funded prekindergarten education for four-year-old children and supported prekindergarten programs with funding through State's Education Fund similar to K-12 education. As a result, many school districts voluntarily began offering prekindergarten, both directly and via contracts with community-based programs, and over time most children in Vermont had some access to publicly-funded prekindergarten education. In 2014, Act 166 moved to expand access statewide by requiring all public school districts to offer state-funded Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) for three-, four-, and five-year-old children not enrolled in kindergarten, for a minimum of 10 hours per week for 35 weeks annually, at the prequalified program location of the family's choosing. To standardize quality, a statewide UPK prequalification process was established for all prekindergarten education programs, including Head Start, private centers, family childcare home providers, and public school-operated programs, to receive approval from the Agency of Education (AOE) and the Department for Children and Families (DCF) and additional requirements related to staffing, assessments, curriculum, and monitoring were added.

In 2023, Act 76 mandated investments and policy changes intended to improve access and affordability to high quality child care and prekindergarten, as well as to help stabilize the early education sector and workforce. The law also created this Committee to explore how to expand Vermont's UPK system from 10-hours per week for all three- and four-year olds to a full school day, full school year program for four-year olds.

### Shifting Economic and Political Landscape

When Act 76 passed in 2023, the legislative intent focused on expanding child care access and stabilizing the early education sector. It stated, "investments and policy changes to Vermont's child care and early learning system shall:

- Increase access to and the quality of child care services and afterschool and summer care programs throughout the State;
- Increase equitable access to and quality of prekindergarten education for children four years of age;
- Provide financial stability to child care programs;
- Stabilize Vermont's talented child care workforce;
- Address the workforce needs of the State's employers;
- Maintain a mixed-delivery system for prekindergarten, child care, and afterschool and summer care;



- Recognize that family child care homes are a key resource for families in rural communities and allow for ongoing financial support to:
  - a. Enable parents to choose to send their children to family child care homes; and
  - b. Provide technical assistance to family child care homes to ensure high-quality child care services are accessible throughout the State; and
- Assign school districts with the responsibility of ensuring equitable prekindergarten access for children who are four years of age on the date by which the child’s school district requires kindergarten students to have attained five years of age or who are five years of age and not yet enrolled in kindergarten” ([Act 76, Sec. 1](#)).

However, much has changed in the landscape since the General Assembly drafted the legislative intent. For example, in 2024 the General Assembly directed the formation of a new Commission on the Future of Public Education after the state witnessed the largest system-wide defeat of local school budgets in state history. In addition, Governor Scott issued calls to school leaders to contain education spending and emphasized that this work would require collaboration between school boards and state government. Scott sees this as “an imperative – for our kids, communities and economy. It will take all of us to stabilize both spending and taxes, so we can focus on making our schools – and our education system as a whole – into the best in the nation from cradle to career” (from Memo to School Leaders, 9/9/2024).

Of note, alongside changes in the political and financial landscape, Vermont’s leaders across all agencies, departments, and divisions related to oversight of UPK have experienced substantial turnover since 2019, including transitions in the Secretary and Deputy Secretary for the Agency of Human Services, the Commissioner of the Department for Children and Families (AHS), the Deputy Commissioner for the Child Development Division (AHS), the Secretary and Deputy Secretary for the Agency of Education, the Director of Student Support Services (AOE), and the Manager for the Early Education Team (AOE). Such significant turnover in leadership has contributed to challenges in aligned vision, strategy, and monitoring of UPK in Vermont.

## **Committee Perspectives**

Leading up to the passage of Act 76, invested parties offered differing views on the future of public prekindergarten. The Administration did not support all components of the bill and significant negotiations between Education and Human Services committees occurred before its passage. In many ways, this mirrored long standing differences between the perspectives of the child care and early education sector and those of the public education system that were not resolved before Act 76 became law. The work of this Committee served an important role in bringing together multiple constituents and visions for the future and highlighted some of the key tensions impacting implementation of public prekindergarten in Vermont.

Committee members had ongoing tensions around the scope and purpose of their charge. Some members considered the Committee's charge to be an opportunity for major systemic change, to

better leverage underutilized resources of public schools, and to create a prekindergarten-12 system that “decouples” AOE and CDD oversight of prekindergarten. These Committee members focused on the law’s language around expanding to all four-year-olds and transitioning three-year-old children to child care and early education. They worried about “maintaining the status quo” of the current prekindergarten system and expressed concerns about containing spending.

Other members considered the law as an opportunity to identify, elevate and support what is working in the current prekindergarten system. They focused on the legislative intent to expand access to prekindergarten education, stabilize the child care sector and workforce, and maintain a mixed delivery system. They were frustrated by pressure to dismantle the prekindergarten system, and worried that major structural change could further destabilize the child care system and workforce. As one member put it, “we are not far off from improving the system; flipping the system would put us two steps back.”

Relatedly, members disagreed over definitions of system affordability. Although affordability wasn’t a topic the full Committee explicitly discussed together, assumptions about what constitutes affordability underlay member disagreements. For example, some Committee members advocated for “economies of scale” to leverage public education resources, such as building infrastructure, administrative capacity, teaching staff, and student services to meet the demand for expanded access to prekindergarten.

Other members pointed to the unknown costs of expanding prekindergarten to all four-year-olds, as well as the potential negative impacts a prekindergarten-12 system would have on the stability of the early care and learning system. Without more detailed analysis on current UPK offerings and readiness for change, members pointed out that it was impossible to know how much full-school-day and full-school-year UPK for four-year-olds would cost school districts for both start-up infrastructure and ongoing costs. In addition, given the long history of community-based programs offering preschool to three- and four-year-old children on both full- and part-time bases, it was unclear how community-based early care and learning providers could or would adjust to serving more three-year-olds and potentially fewer four-year-olds. Some members pointed to the efficiency of embedding prekindergarten education in existing high-quality early childhood education settings rather than building out new ones.

## **Committee Resources**

Finally, the Committee faced structural and resource limitations that influenced its work. Although tasked with making recommendations on infrastructure needs, costs, and measures to ensure capacity is available to meet the demand for prekindergarten education in Vermont, the Committee was not resourced to conduct the scale of study required to make informed recommendations. Similarly, asked to represent the needs of both the State and local education agencies, and to consult with necessary constituents to accomplish its charge, the Committee was

not resourced to conduct broad community engagement and so relied on the volunteer time of individual members.

Critical data and information required to address the Committee's charge were not available or accessible to the Committee when needed. In part, this stemmed from leadership turnover at the Agency of Education, where some of the data and information was housed. Since Zoie Saunders joined the Committee in September, 2024, substantial efforts have been made to inventory, coordinate and analyze prekindergarten data to address these deficits. These efforts will positively impact decisions about how to design and implement prekindergarten expansion. However, there remain many areas where data are insufficient or non-existent, as Building Bright Futures noted in their 2023 inventory of [Data Needed for PreK Decision Making](#).

Additionally, and as stated above, the diversity of experience represented by Committee members was an advantage to rich learning but reduced the Committee's capacity to address implementation planning.

# BEST PRACTICES IN PREKINDERGARTEN EDUCATION

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## **National Research**

Decades of research show that attending high-quality preschool can have profound positive impacts on children's success in kindergarten and support their later success in school and life (Minervino, 2014; Phillips et al., 2017; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Children who attend high-quality prekindergarten are better prepared for school and are less likely to be identified as having special needs or to be held back in elementary school than children who did not attend preschool (Meloy et al., 2019). The more time children spend in high-quality prekindergarten programs, the larger the gains. Children who attend two years of prekindergarten fare better in school than those who attend one (Reynolds, 1995; Wen et al., 2012), and children in full-day programs (6-8 hrs) make larger gains than children in programs lasting fewer than three hours (Atteberry et al., 2019).

Research has examined the specific factors that contribute to long term benefits from preschool (Weiland, 2018). These include early learning and development standards that are comprehensive, developmentally appropriate, and culturally aligned (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2024); research-based curriculum focused on key domains of language, literacy, mathematics and social-emotional development; and curriculum supports such as professional development and additional resources (Bredenkamp et al., 2024). Smaller class sizes (maximum of 20 per classroom) and fewer children per teacher (staff-child ratio 1:10 or lower) also positively impact children's achievement and educational success (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2024; Nye et al., 1999).

Children thrive in the context of nurturing relationships and interactions with adults who are attuned to their learning and responsive to their individual needs (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016). Positive adult-child relationships, coupled with high-quality learning environments, are foundational to the healthy development of young children (National Research Council et al., 2015). Therefore, investing in a well-prepared and supported early childhood workforce – including teacher preparation, specialized training in early education, ongoing professional development, coaching, continuous quality improvement – plays a crucial role in outcomes for children (NIEER, 2024).

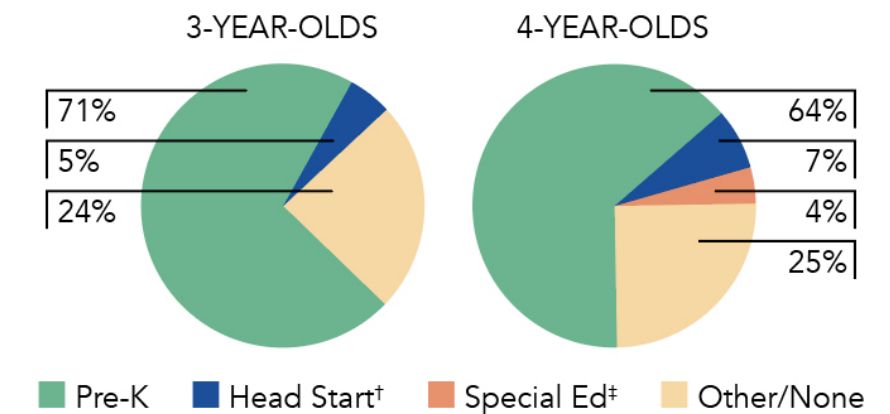
## **Vermont's Successes**

Vermont's prekindergarten education system aligns with national research on best practices in the areas of providing access and meeting national benchmarks for early learning and development standards, curriculum supports, appropriate class size and teacher-student ratios.

## Access to Prekindergarten

Vermont is a leader in access to publicly funded prekindergarten for three- and four-year olds. The state rates second in the nation for the percentage of three-year olds (71%) enrolled in prekindergarten (NIEER, 2024)<sup>1</sup>.

### PERCENT OF POPULATION ENROLLED IN PUBLIC ECE



<sup>†</sup> Some Head Start children may also be counted in state pre-K.

<sup>‡</sup> Estimates children in special education not also enrolled in state pre-K or Head Start.

From <https://nieer.org/yearbook/2023/state-profiles/vermont>

Vermont has also been recognized for having a “truly universal program” because there is no income threshold for participation in prekindergarten (Barnett et al., 2024). Vermont’s strides in universal access align with research on the benefits of spending time in high quality prekindergarten. Children who attend two years of prekindergarten fare better in school than those who attend one year (Reynolds, 1995; Wen et al., 2012), and children in full-day programs (6-8 hrs) make larger gains than children in programs lasting fewer than three hours (Atteberry et al., 2019). In Vermont, many children access two years of UPK and some children access three years of UPK because five-year-old children not yet enrolled in kindergarten can access the prekindergarten benefit.

Vermont’s prekindergarten education system uses a mixed-delivery approach, which leverages the capacity of existing preschool providers in center-based, home child care, and public-school settings, and coordinates federal, state and local funding to meet the demand for prekindergarten. In 2023, most of these children (60%) were enrolled in center-based or home child care prekindergarten programs and 40% were enrolled in school-based programs (*Vermont’s Early Childhood Data Portal*, 2024). The mixed-delivery approach aligns with recommendations from

<sup>1</sup> The percentage of 4-year-olds enrolled in public prek was higher until the 2022/2023 school year. It is assumed that the drop was related to COVID-era arrangements already in place for those children.

the National Institute for Early Education Research and from the U.S. Department of Education and Administration for Children and Families. In a 2024 letter to education colleagues, these Federal agencies urged state-level agencies, early childhood education professionals and local school districts to coordinate their efforts for improving access to high-quality preschool experiences that meet the needs of more children and families. They recommended mixed-delivery as an effective approach to expand access, improve quality, ensure flexible options to meet diverse family needs, and support smooth transitions between preschool and kindergarten (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024).

**Benchmarks for High-Quality Prekindergarten**

Vermont meets the majority of national benchmarks for high quality prekindergarten education. To assess this, the Committee reviewed three nationally regarded tools for assessing high quality prekindergarten education: the [National Institute for Early Education Research \(NIEER\) Benchmarks](#), the [National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\) Program Standards & Unifying Framework](#), and the [Head Start Performance Standards](#). We compared the quality standards of each tool with Vermont’s state level policy requirements, as well as how these standards vary across for public school, center-based, family child care prekindergarten education settings. The table below compares Vermont’s state-level requirements to eleven policy areas benchmarked by national tools.

**Table 2. Comparison of Vermont’s State-level Prekindergarten Requirements and National Quality Standards**

PreK Policy	Vermont Requirement	National Quality Standard
<b>Early Learning &amp; Development Standards</b>	Vermont requires all preK programs to use Vermont Early Learning Standards ( <a href="#">VELS</a> ), which align with national benchmarks, and to conduct aligned child-level assessments 2x/year using TS GOLD	✓ <a href="#">NIEER</a> : Comprehensive, aligned, supported, culturally sensitive
		✓ <a href="#">NAEYC</a> : Aligned, promotes learning in: social, emotional, physical, language & cognitive
		✓ <a href="#">Head Start</a> : Research-based, comprehensive, inclusive, focused on social & emotional development, language & literacy, cognition & physical development
<b>Curriculum Supports</b>	Vermont requires locally-selected curricula to be evidence-based and aligned with VELs; the state provides guidance, materials and technical support and monitors compliance.	✓ <a href="#">NIEER</a> : Approval process or guidance & supports for implementation
		✓ <a href="#">NAEYC</a> : Developmentally, culturally & linguistically appropriate; effective teaching approaches for child’s goals
		✓ <a href="#">Head Start</a> : Standardized training; materials for implementation

<b>Lead (Classroom) Teacher Degree</b>	Vermont's requirements for lead (classroom) teacher vary across settings. Public school programs require an AOE-licensed educator to provide all instruction. Center-based prekindergarten education programs are required to have an AOE licensed teacher onsite during UPK hours. Family child care settings are required to have an AOE- licensed teacher as a mentor for 3 hours/week.	<p>✗ <u>NIEER</u>: BA at minimum</p> <p>✗ <u>NAEYC</u>: AA in ECE at minimum</p> <p>✗ <u>Head Start</u>: No less than 50% of teachers must have a BA in ECE, CDA, or equivalent</p>
<b>Assistant Teacher Degree</b>	Vermont does not require all assistant teachers or paraprofessionals in preK classrooms to have specialized training in ECE.	<p>✗ <u>NIEER</u>: CDA or equivalent</p> <p>✗ <u>NAEYC</u>: CDA or equivalent</p> <p>✗ <u>Head Start</u>: Preschool CDA</p>
<b>Teacher Specialized Training</b>	Vermont requires that lead (classroom) teachers have specialized training in early childhood education and/or child development, such as ECE, CD, Elem. Ed with ECE, ECE SpEd	<p>✓ <u>NIEER</u>: Specializing in preK (ECE or child development)</p> <p>✓ <u>NAEYC</u>: At least 120 hours of ECE Training</p> <p>✓ <u>Head Start</u>: At least an AA in ECE, CD, or Equivalent</p>
<b>Staff Professional Development &amp; Coaching</b>	Child care licensing and AOE licensing require at least 15 hours/year and annual individualized PD plans. Although programs involve coaching across settings, this is not a coordinated state-level policy and state-level supports are not universally available.	<p>✗ <u>NIEER</u>: For all staff, at least 15 hours/year; annual individualized PD plan, coaching</p> <p>✓ <u>NAEYC</u>: Ongoing staff development, including orientation and opportunities for continuing education</p> <p>✗ <u>Head Start</u>: At least 16 hours/year; individualized PD plan, coaching</p>
<b>Staff:Child Ratio</b>	1:10 (three & 4-year olds)	<p>✓ <u>NIEER</u>: 1:10</p> <p>✓ <u>NAEYC</u>: 1:10</p> <p>✓ <u>Head Start</u>: 1:10</p>
<b>Screening &amp;</b>	Child care licensing and SU/SD	<p>✓ <u>NIEER</u>: Vision, hearing &amp; health screenings &amp; referral</p>

<b>Referral</b>	policies for enrollment require documentation of screenings for vision, hearing & other health interventions; referral required if child presents with an issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <u>NAEYC</u>: Promotes nutrition &amp; health; protect children &amp; staff from illness</li> <li>✓ <u>Head Start</u>: Vision, hearing &amp; health screenings, referral and support</li> </ul>
<b>Continuous Quality Improvement System</b>	Vermont's prek programs must achieve 4 or 5 stars through STARS, which includes a formal portfolio and an onsite observation using an evidence-based assessment tool.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <u>NIEER</u>: Structured classroom observations; data used for program improvement</li> <li>✓ <u>NAEYC</u>: Formal &amp; informal assessment; child data</li> <li>✓ <u>Head Start</u>: Annual self- assessment; data used for program improvement; child data</li> </ul>
<b>Safety</b>	AOE's & CDD's Child Care Licensing Regulations require age-appropriate safety protocols re: physical program location, supervision of children, emergency planning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <u>NAEYC</u>: Regulations re: facility, furnishings, supervision, sanitation &amp; emergency plans</li> <li>✓ <u>Head Start</u>: Regular safety checks, staff safety training, emergency response plan, background checks</li> </ul>
<b>Relationships</b>	VELS focuses on adult-child relationships; CLASS tool assesses adult-child interactions; STARS includes family engagement; Title 1 schools follow requirements for parent & family engagement; Child care licensing focus on adult, child & family relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <u>NAEYC</u>: Positive adult-child relationships; collaborative &amp; responsive family engagement</li> <li>✓ <u>Head Start</u>: Inclusive &amp; responsive family engagement; family participation in program; information transparency</li> </ul>

The table above shows that Vermont has state-level benchmarks in place in seven of eleven nationally defined areas to ensure high quality prekindergarten education, including early learning & development standards, curriculum supports, teacher specialized training, class size and ratios, screenings and referrals, continuous quality improvements, safety standards and relationships.

Vermont's bright spots include its use of the Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS) across prekindergarten settings. The VELS offer comprehensive standards for learning and development from birth through third grade, were approved by the State Board of Education in 2015, and are included in Vermont's Educational Quality Standards. In addition to meeting NIEER, NAEYC and Head Start standards, the VELS also align with the K-3 Common Core State Standards for English LA and Math, Next Generation Science Standards, VT's Grade Level Expectations, Early MTSS Framework & Pyramid Model of Practices, Division of Early Childhood (DEC) recommended practices and the Teaching Strategies Gold assessment required for UPK.



Additionally, all Vermont state prekindergarten programs, including licensed family child care homes, center based child care and prekindergarten programs, and afterschool programs, are required to attain at least four of five stars in Vermont’s Quality Recognition and Improvement System (QRIS) – STARS. Vermont revised STARS in 2023 to focus even more closely on positive outcomes for children and engagement with families and to more directly promote continuous quality improvement. STARS has embedded structured observations of classroom quality using CLASS (The Classroom Assessment Scoring System®) a validated, research-based tool which can be used across all early childhood education settings. The accompanying SPARQS program provides quality support specialists to offer consultation, coaching, mentoring, and technical assistance for continuous quality improvement.

***Recommendations to Build On Vermont’s Success***

Maintain the current prekindergarten benefit for both three-year-olds and four-year-olds and take steps to expand hours, starting with four-year-olds.

Ensure that prekindergarten programs continue to exist in a mixed delivery system (center-based, public school, and family child care) settings and that these settings continue to meet the high quality markers identified as best practices.

Continue to monitor quality through Vermont’s newly-revised Quality Rating and Improvement System (STARS). CDD and AOE partner with relevant constituencies to utilize learnings from the implementation of STARS system to better support continuous quality improvement at the system and program levels and utilizing data from CLASS assessments to better develop and target training and support.

**Vermont’s Areas for Improvement**

Vermont’s prekindergarten education system has room for improvement in teacher preparation, operationalizing special education services, data access and coordination, and system oversight and coordination.

***Teacher Preparation***

There are three areas where Vermont does not currently meet national standards: teacher degree, assistant teacher degree, and staff professional development. The table below outlines how requirements for each of these prekindergarten vary across program settings.

**Table 3: Vermont’s Prekindergarten Teacher Preparation Requirements Across Settings**

Lead (Classroom) Teacher Degree Requirements in Vermont Prekindergarten Settings
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**Public school programs:** AOE-licensed educators with specialized training in Early Childhood Education or Early Childhood Special Education are required in each PreK classroom. PreK education programming must be directly led by a teacher with an AOE-issued Vermont Educator license with an Early Childhood Education or Early Childhood Special Education endorsement

✓ Public school programs exceed national benchmark of BA plus specialized training in preK

**Center-based programs:** PreK teachers are required to have a minimum of 21 early childhood-related college credits plus a year of experience (or other equivalent options laid out in rule 7.3.2.2 in Vermont child care licensing regulations). Center-based prekindergarten education programs are required to have an AOE licensed teacher onsite for 10 hours per week, coinciding with the hours of prekindergarten education paid for by tuition from districts during UPK hours, but are not required to have an AOE-licensed teacher in each classroom.

✗ Center-based programs are not required to meet national benchmark of BA plus specialized training in preK

**Family child care programs:** Registered programs are required to complete Vermont's 45-hour Fundamentals for Early Childhood Professionals course; licensed family child care programs are required to have a Child Development Associate (CDA) or equivalent; many family child care providers exceed the minimum standards. Family child care settings are required to have an AOE-licensed teacher as a mentor for 3 hours/week.

✗ Family child care programs are not required to meet national benchmark of BA plus specialized training in preK

### Assistant Teacher Degree Requirements in Vermont Prekindergarten Settings

**Public school programs:** Vermont does not detail requirements for paraprofessionals across schools. Instructional araprofessionals in schools with Title IA funding must also have completed 2 years of study at an institution of higher education; obtained an AA at minimum, or equivalent. However, they are not required to have specialized training in ECE.

✗ Public school programs are not required to meet national benchmark of specialized training in ECE

**Center-based programs:** Vermont does not detail requirements for assistant teachers in prekindergarten classrooms beyond the minimum requirements within child care licensing that include basic health and safety training and the 45-hour Fundamentals for Early Childhood Professionals course or equivalent.

✗ Center-based programs are not required to meet national benchmark of a CDA plus specialized training in preK

**Family child care programs:** Vermont does not detail requirements for assistant teachers in prekindergarten programs beyond the minimum requirements within child care licensing that include basic health and safety training and the 45-hour Fundamentals for Early Childhood Professionals course or equivalent.

✗ Family child care programs are not required to not national benchmark of a CDA plus specialized training in preK

### Staff Professional Development & Coaching Requirements in Vermont Prekindergarten Settings

**Public school programs:** AOE regulations meet the benchmark for ongoing professional development and individualized professional development plans for prekindergarten teachers and staff. However, the standards related to practice-based coaching and mentoring are locally determined. Educator evaluation and coaching, as well as mentoring described by the State Board

✗ May not meet national benchmark of least 15 hours/year, individualized PD plans and coaching

Rules may meet the coaching benchmark, but it is not documented.

**Center-based programs:** Child care licensing regulations meet the benchmark for ongoing professional development and individualized professional development plans for prekindergarten teachers and staff. However, there are not standards related to practice-based coaching or resources allocated to support that coaching. The oversight provided by the onsite AOE-licensed teacher to lead teachers may meet the coaching benchmark, but it is not documented.

✗ May not meet national benchmark of least 15 hours/year, individualized PD plans and coaching

**Family child care programs:** Child care licensing regulations meet the benchmark for ongoing professional development and an individualized professional development plan. Family child care settings are required to have an AOE- licensed teacher as a mentor for 3 hours/week; therefore these settings meet the national requirements for ongoing professional development.

✓ Meets national benchmark of at least 15 hours/year; individualized PD plans and coaching

As the table above shows, requirements for teacher preparation vary across prekindergarten settings. Most notably, public schools exceed the national benchmark that all lead (classroom)prekindergarten teachers have a BA and specialized training, but center-based and family child care programs may not. This variation reflects Vermont’s history of early childhood education as a field that has operated outside of public education for many decades. When publicly-funded Universal Prekindergarten was established in Vermont, there was recognition that educational pathways and credentials varied significantly across settings. In addition, there was recognition that engagement from an AOE-licensed educator is an important part of Vermont’s approach to high-quality universal prekindergarten. Vermont’s current prekindergarten standards were an attempt to balance the realities of 2014 while also ensuring widespread, or “universal,” access to prekindergarten education by including the varied settings where prekindergarten-aged children already were. The differences in educator qualifications across settings was the subject of multiple conversations within committee and subcommittee meetings; some committee members urged for consistent standards right away while others were concerned about the implications for access and the need for Vermont data to drive changes in quality standards.

Based on current minimum standards for assistant teachers or paraprofessionals, no prekindergarten program setting consistently meets the benchmark of a CDA/equivalent plus specialized training in early childhood education. Public school prekindergarten programs utilizing Title 1 Instructional Paraprofessionals surpass the credential requirement but don’t require specialized training in ECE. Many assistant teachers and paraeducators may meet or exceed these benchmarks in practice.

Vermont does not meet the standard for professional development and coaching because we lack state level definitions and resources for coaching. All settings meet the national benchmarks for minimum professional development hours and annual individualized PD plans for all prekindergarten staff. However, only family child care settings currently meet the benchmark for ongoing, classroom-embedded support (coaching or mentoring) because they are required to have an AOE-licensed teacher as a mentor for 3 hours/week. Although public-school and center-based prekindergarten settings also offer embedded support, frequency is determined locally and therefore does not meet the national benchmark.

Educator preparation is a critical component of high quality prekindergarten and essential to achieving positive, sustained outcomes for young children (NIEER, 2021). In the initial decade of Universal Prekindergarten, Vermont implemented a number of supports and programs to assist educators in achieving increased qualifications. Supported by AOE, CDD, and federal grants, these supports offer grants and scholarships for college-level coursework and degrees; grants for fees associated with alternate pathways to teacher licensure; and state-level programs to support the attainment of AOE educator licenses for those working in non-school- based settings<sup>2</sup>.

These programs are especially important given the chronically low compensation in center-based and family child care programs and have successfully supported many educators to earn degrees and AOE-issued educator licenses. They have also supported those working in assistant teacher or paraprofessional roles to increase their training and credentials. At the same time, Vermont's workforce as a whole - and educational workforce specifically - has been challenged by demographic shifts, by COVID-related changes to work, and by pressures on higher education resulting in shortages of qualified professionals for many key roles. As a result, the state needs significant and focused investment for Vermont to meet the national benchmark for teacher preparation across all settings.

Systems that have successfully increased educator qualifications, "create on-ramps for the existing workforce and for the folks who are not necessarily on the path to a four-year degree and... develop pathways and supports for them to get the higher education that they need" (Barnett, 2024). For example, New Jersey preschool teachers in public schools and community-based settings have equivalent requirements: a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and a Preschool–3rd grade certification. To achieve this, the state supported teachers to obtain the required credentials over a six year period through scholarship funding, supporting colleges to establish satellite classrooms convenient for teachers, and granting extra time for teachers who were making steady progress toward certification (Garver et al., 2023). Other states have implemented equivalent standards for community-based prekindergarten teachers by offering multiple pathways toward certification, including [giving credit for prior learning](#) to reflect extensive experience in prekindergarten classrooms prior to their PreK internship, providing

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<sup>2</sup> The current program that includes sponsorship of provisional educators' licenses by AOE is currently set to expire in June 2025

[scholarships and financial incentives](#), using data to target recruitment, implementing TEACH [apprenticeship models](#), offering alternatives such as an [early childhood ancillary certificate](#) and offering [targeted support for credential completion](#) (Connors-Tadros, 2024).

Workforce challenges are exacerbated by differences in teacher pay. Nationally, preschool teachers tend to earn less than K–12 teachers, and preschool teachers in community-based settings earn less than those in public schools (Garver et al., 2023). It’s particularly difficult to recruit and hire qualified educators in Vermont, and increasing certification requirements only make it more difficult. Therefore, working toward pay parity must be included in efforts toward greater teacher credentials (McClellan et al., 2017). Alabama and New Jersey addressed this issue by requiring that state-funded preschool teachers in community-based settings receive salaries commensurate with their peers in LEA settings, and provide funding to meet this requirement (Garver et al., 2023). In all cases, these efforts have required targeted resources and five- to ten-year transition plans to see success.

### Recommendations to Build Toward Meeting National Standards

Charge agencies to develop transition plans and timelines to meet national benchmarks for lead (classroom) teacher preparation across settings.

Build and invest in models from other states (and expand access to Vermont programs) that have successfully increased the number of early childhood educator prekindergarten teachers with a bachelor’s degree and educator licensure with early childhood education (ECE) endorsement, including options and supports for provisional licensure for educators working in all settings.

Clearly define the coaching requirements and frequency across settings to meet NIEER’s benchmark for professional development; consider ways to leverage Vermont’s existing coaching and mentoring efforts and models, including initiatives like Early Multi-tiered Systems of Support, Vermont’s System for Program Access to Resources for Quality Supports (SPARQS), successful models used by LEA’s and the Vermont Early Childhood Network’s Communities of Practice.

Review and expand Vermont’s existing efforts to support pathways to teacher qualifications including the Vermont Higher Education Collaborative, Early Childhood Education Apprenticeship and Youth Apprenticeship programs; Vermont’s [Advancing ECE as a Profession](#) initiative; and [Roadmap to Student Success for the Early Childhood Education Workforce](#).

## ***Data Systems***

Vermont's vision is to use high-quality, up-to-date data to inform policy and programmatic decisions to improve equitable access to and quality of services, resources, and supports for young children, their families, and the early childhood system. This vision for data integration is held as a national best practice (Child Trends, n.d.; Garver, 2024; Regenstein, 2022) and remains a priority in Vermont. The entity responsible for holding the vision and strategy for early childhood data integration and alignment efforts in Vermont is Building Bright Futures, in partnership with each agency, department, and division supporting children and families. The full overview of [Vermont's Vision for Early Childhood Data Integration and Data-Driven Decision-Making](#) can be found within [Vermont's Early Childhood Data and Policy Center](#).

While Vermont has made progress in data-driven decision-making, there are significant challenges to achieving this vision (Building Bright Futures, 2020; Vermont Early Childhood Data & Policy Center, 2022). Early childhood constituents have reported that Vermont currently lacks the data and resources to sufficiently collect data that answers key policy and program questions. Vermont's technological infrastructure is antiquated, and there are limited people and time to collect and analyze data. Additionally, the culture does not promote data literacy at all levels of the EC system, or the collection and use of data in cross-sector collaboration. Data infrastructure and resources is a primary driver that would facilitate progress on data integration, close data gaps, and promote data informed decision making across sectors, and across the themes in this report. More specifically,

- Lack of access to basic early childhood data
- Limited ability to examine inequities
- Data and technological infrastructure
- Lack of alignment in definitions and reporting periods limits comparisons
- Collecting data
- Disruptions in data collection due to COVID-19 and measurement changes.

As a result, throughout this process, the Committee encountered challenges with access and coordination of data related to prekindergarten education. As cited in BBF's memos to the legislature in 2023, while work has been done to examine Vermont's UPK system over the last 10 years, there are significant gaps and limitations in the state's understanding of the current system.

The BBF Early Childhood Data and Evaluation Strategic Plan Committee has begun to document a [Data Development Agenda for UPK](#) that includes the following:

- Identification of existing cross-sector data by topic and priority
- Limitations, gaps, and challenges
- Data needed to inform decision-making
- Questions and considerations

- Identification of lead data entity or data steward.

In addition, BBF developed the [Data Needed to Inform Decision-Making in UPK](#) document to more concisely articulate key data required to understand the current system to inform the future of UPK in Vermont.

The work of the PEIC, in close partnership with CDD, AOE, and Building Bright Futures, has made progress in filling some of these data gaps over the course of its tenure as reflected by the surveying and data analysis efforts. The following data efforts have been prioritized and will result in strong, systematic data collection and publications over the coming years:

- Prioritization of UPK data analysis and dissemination: The Agency of Education and the Child Development Division are working to compile and analyze existing UPK data (report forthcoming) and will partner on dissemination with Vermont's Early Childhood Data and Policy Center at Building Bright Futures through the data portal, the State of Vermont's Children annual report, and data briefs.
- Documentation of a Prekindergarten Program Quality Matrix: outlining current national benchmarks and best practices for high quality prekindergarten education and documents if and how these benchmarks are met across settings in Vermont's regulated programs.
- Surveys of Superintendents, Principals, and School Board Members (preliminary data results can be seen in appendix X, data brief forthcoming)
- Early Childhood Grand Rounds (June 2024) - The State of Preschool: Situating Vermont within the National Context
  - [Recording](#)
  - [Summary](#)
  - [Panelist Bios](#)
- Strategic planning & preK monitoring and data integration efforts: The following initiatives are now underway to support Vermont's ability to have a clearer picture of preK alongside early childhood service provision and outcomes for children and families:
  - Preschool Development Grant (PDG) Activity 5.1 - Continuous Quality Improvement and Monitoring in Universal Prekindergarten Education (Key partners: AOE, CDD) - Aligning communication between agencies, developing notification tools, implementing welcome visits, strengthening tracking systems through ACIS.
  - Preschool Development Grant (PDG) Activity 5.3 - Early Childhood Data Monitoring and Integration (Key Partners: BBF, CDD, AOE, DMH, VDH, ORE) - Interagency collaboration led by BBF to (1) collect, analyze, share, and use data, using a continuous quality improvement lens to monitor data practices, (2) utilize the Data and Evaluation Committee meetings and other convenings to develop, commit to, and implement a vision for data integration supported by data governance and based on existing gaps and opportunities; (3) Develop strategies to link data across sectors and data collection repositories; and (4) Make data meaningful and publicly available.

- The Hunt Institute’s Early Childhood Leadership Summit Vermont Team Goals (Key Partners: BBF, CDD, AOE, House Representatives): Prioritizing the development and implementation of a new, collaborative monitoring and accountability protocol for UPK that is based on the data development agenda, existing data, lessons learned from the past 10 years of CQI, and national best practice.
- The cost-of-care analysis commissioned by CDD to create a new way to establish and update prekindergarten payments made to non-school-based prekindergarten programs for the 25/26 school year and beyond.

### Recommendations for Data Systems

Strengthen Vermont’s capacity for ongoing assessment and evaluation to monitor the delivery and effectiveness of both high-quality child development services as well as access to comprehensive services.

- Task the Agency of Education, Child Development Division, and Building Bright Futures to create/update and implement a new monitoring and accountability protocol including robust research and data collection and analysis process to monitor UPK. The development process should include input from impacted individuals (families, educators, Act 166 Coordinators, Superintendents etc) and include data collected at the program and LEA levels. Data collected should include financial, enrollment by student characteristics, staffing, and student outcomes.
- Agree on a cycle of planning, observation and feedback across agencies that ensures data on classroom quality is systematically collected, and that local programs and the state both use information from the CQIS to help improve policy or practice.
- 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.

### ***Prekindergarten Oversight***

The Committee focused their efforts on understanding how oversight of the prekindergarten system currently works. We developed a [UPK Oversight Matrix](#) to outline the system-level oversight roles of various organizations and agencies, including CDD, AOE, LEAs, SBE, LEAs & BBF.

In legislation and in practice, Vermont’s prekindergarten system is overseen jointly by AOE and CDD. Together, state staff worked to develop the prekindergarten rules and VELs, develop prekindergarten implementation policies and materials, implement the Access and Continuous Improvement System (ACIS) to ensure compliance with UPK standards, and support school and program staff. AOE leads the program prequalification process, monitors multiple areas of program-level compliance, provides communication and support, leads state-level Early



Childhood Special Education functions, supports Teaching Strategies GOLD implementation; publishes the Ready for K Survey, and supports inclusion through Early MTSS and other quality support efforts. CDD implements child care licensing and the STARS system, partners with AOE to monitor program-level compliance via the ACIS system, collaborates with LEAs to support identified children's transitions from Early Intervention to school districts for special education, and supports multiple workforce development projects to increase credentials and professional support projects to improve quality and support inclusion.

Various research has found that having one, separate oversight body is highly effective for streamlining and amplifying the impact of prekindergarten. This recommendation is typically accompanied by a call for vision, leadership, and accountability for outcomes. A 2022 analysis conducted on Vermont's early childhood system (inclusive of child care, prekindergarten education, and other supports and services targeted to children five and under) recommended "a new unit of state government that is focused entirely on early childhood, and that is not administered solely by either the Agency of Human Services or the Agency of Education" ([Regenstein & Patel, 2022](#)). This recommendation reflected complementary expertise and relationships held by both AOE and AHS. NIEER also highlighted Michigan's creation of a new Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential, which addresses early childhood education, higher education, and other extended learning programs. Additionally, NIEER commends West Virginia's shared oversight for its long-standing WV Universal PreK Collaborative System that includes state and county level collaborative teams that include commissioning analysis used for other grades on each team.

Constituents interviewed about oversight described inconsistencies across the prekindergarten system that are associated with joint oversight across CDD and AOE. They specifically called out duplication and administrative burden in accounting and reporting requirements, as well as duplication of fingerprint supported background checks for public school staff. Superintendents, principals and school board members surveyed by the Committee identified streamlining joint oversight of their top considerations for expanding prekindergarten access as well as a top need for support for system oversight. As one survey respondent noted, "the regulations of a child care facility inside a public elementary school is a huge burden to the operation of the school for a majority of the student population served in a PK-6 setting."

Head Start constituents reported on the particular challenges their programs face to comply with requirements of state agencies as well as federal program performance standards, fiscal accountability measures, and eligibility criteria. Protocols for fingerprinting vary across entities and, because records are not allowed to be shared based on federal standards, the administrative burden of these protocols often falls to staff. They noted the importance of strong continuity, consistency and collaboration across the systems, as well as a shared focus on child outcomes across the prekindergarten system. State agency leaders agreed with the focus on child outcomes

and reported that some difficulties or inconsistencies were due to implementation concerns at the SD/SU-level rather than state-level factors related to joint oversight.

Multiple constituent groups noted that Prekindergarten Coordinators help build capacity, bring consistency and play critical roles in liaising and coordinating across prekindergarten audiences, agencies and policies. Although all districts are required to designate a prekindergarten contact, there is no guidance on the expertise or time commitment required of this position. In districts that have formalized this role, some constituents identified significant benefits to families and programs as well as to the PK-grade 12 education system.

### Recommendations for Prekindergarten Oversight

Consider creating a state-level UPK Collaborative with representation from education, human services, Head Start, child care, and Building Bright Futures (similar to West Virginia’s model) to guide ongoing UPK policy and implementation.

Assess and clarify the role of prekindergarten coordinators, including defining the expertise and time commitment required to benefit families, districts and the prekindergarten system.

Assess and implement systems to efficiently support mixed delivery such as development of a standard contract for UPK partners, alignment between state systems for educator qualifications and continuing education, and further review of interaction between child care licensing requirements and UPK .

### ***Financing***

The Committee’s discussion on the financial considerations related to prekindergarten focused on the information needed to determine the costs of implementing prekindergarten as envisioned in Act 76, the difference between current costs and costs of that new model, and implications for the funding methodology.

In Fall 2023, the Committee reviewed cost and funding information and models to prepare a report on prekindergarten pupil weight as directed in Sec 26 of Act 76; [this report](#) was submitted to the legislature in December 2023. The report explained that, while the Uniform Chart of Accounts collects data on prekindergarten costs at the school level, there is not a uniform methodology for allocating and reporting costs nor associated information on how many hours of prekindergarten education was provided. Thus, the state does not have an estimate for the current cost of prekindergarten education at the state, district, or program-level.

AOE and CDD consulted with NIERR on whether national research could provide an estimate on the cost of prekindergarten education in Vermont; NIERR provided an estimate in November 2023 that the cost of providing high-quality prekindergarten education in Vermont is \$13,626; this is for

6 hours/day and 180 days/year, at NIEER quality standards, and with all teaching staff paid on par with public school educators. However, this does not include costs for construction or fit-up (including dedicated playgrounds), special education, or school/district-level administration including resources to manage partnerships with community-based Universal Prekindergarten programs.

Based on review of this information, the committee was unanimous in their belief that the pupil weight for a full-school-day, full-school-year prekindergarten education student would be at least 1.0 and most likely be more. The report recommended updating the Pupil Weighting Factors Report to include prekindergarten. In addition, it highlighted the need to address cost differences by program setting, student-teacher ratios, and staff qualifications.

The committee also discussed the methodology used to set the tuition rate paid to community-based prekindergarten providers. The statewide prekindergarten tuition rate for the 23/24 school year was \$3,764.00 to cover 10 hours per week, for 35 weeks during the academic year. As explained in [this memo](#), this amount is based on NIERR cost estimates in 2015 and increased each year based on the New England Economic Project cumulative price index. Members of the committee highlighted costs - such as staffing and insurance - that have increased more significantly than other costs in recent years. CDD shared that it planned to contract for a cost-of-care analysis for child care in early childhood and afterschool programs, and would request the analysis to include cost estimates for Universal Prekindergarten that could be adjusted for age, setting, and quality factors. Several committee members noted this analysis would be useful for determining an updated tuition formula for Universal Prekindergarten.

Concerns about the resources required for prekindergarten expansion was a top issue for superintendents, principals and school board members surveyed by the Committee. Most school leaders indicated the need for increased funding and cited concerns about the financial resources required, and the impact on school budgets overall. In the words of one school leader:

*This change to the publicly funded pre-K model will have a positive impact on the well-being of Vermont's children. With that said, in a time when schools are facing staffing, facilities and budget challenges, this change will have many unintended consequences that will impact the efficacy and financial stability of public education in our state.*

School leaders also outlined additional resource needs required to expand prekindergarten education to all four-year-olds, including staff planning and implementation time, physical infrastructure and materials, workforce capacity, training and support, transportation and technology upgrades.

Finally, several members of the committee pointed out the potential of financial benefits from a more school-driven four-year-old only model that may be able to leverage under-utilized classrooms, administrative capacity, and staffing in schools.

### **Recommendations for Financing**

Commission analysis of Vermont's pupil weight for prekindergarten.

Use the cost-of-care analysis commissioned by CDD to create a new methodology to establish and update prekindergarten payments made to non-school-based prekindergarten programs for the 25/26 school year and beyond.

Model anticipated systems-level costs for prekindergarten at various hours and delivery models before making major changes to prekindergarten.

## CHANGES PROPOSED BY ACT 76

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Section 2 of Act 76 proposes to achieve its legislative intent by implementing the following changes:

1. Make prekindergarten programs available for the full-school-day and full-school-year for all four-year-old children;
2. Transition three-year-olds from the current 10-hour prekindergarten benefit to the child care and early education system;
3. Require school districts to ensure four-year-olds whose families choose to access prekindergarten programs have access; and
4. Allow school districts to choose to provide prekindergarten programs directly within schools, through direct contracting with private programs or other public schools, or through a combination of these options.

The sections below describe the Committee's analysis of the implications of these proposed changes, as well as recommendations for implementing the changes.

### **1. Make prekindergarten programs available for the full-school-day and full-school-year for all four-year-old children**

The Law charges Vermont to expand the current 350-hour/year state-funded prekindergarten benefit to a full-school-day and full-school-year schedule for all four-year-olds. This charge has implications for alignment with K-2 regulations and out-of-school care for families.

Overall, the Committee affirmed the desire to increase the number of hours that prekindergarten education is offered to Vermont children. Given national research that demonstrates that most children benefit from more hours (Atteberry et al., 2019; Reynolds, 1995), increasing the amount of high-quality prekindergarten education was a shared goal of committee members, though cost remained a concern.

Some committee members and constituents emphasized the need for and benefits of family choice, indicating that some families prefer a part-day program. Others pointed out that many four-year-olds still need naps mid-day and it may not be cost-effective to include those in a prekindergarten model.

Other committee members highlighted benefits of more four-year-olds attending prekindergarten in the full-school-day model, including decreased transitions for some four-year-olds, and – if more students are served in school-based programs – the potential for increased oversight for instruction and increased access to school-based, wrap-around services and resources such as curriculum supports, professional development and coaching, special education services, and transportation.

### ***Alignment with K-2 Regulations***

To understand this change, the Committee explored the current State Board of Education regulations related to attendance and length of day for [prekindergarten](#) and [kindergarten through grade 2](#). Vermont does not mandate school attendance before age six, nor does it mandate full day kindergarten, though this is what Vermont experiences, on the whole. The State Board rules define the length of school day for kindergarten as a minimum of two instructional hours. However, in any calendar week, five school days may be counted if the total number of hours of instructional time is equal to or exceeds 10 hours per week. Although most of Vermont's kindergartens report that they provide full day programs, these data do not differentiate whether children are present for a full day or whether the program is open a full day for multiple classes. It is therefore difficult even to assess the current common practices across Vermont's kindergartens.

For grades 1-2, State Board rules define the length of a full school day as a minimum of four instructional hours including recess, excluding lunch. However, in any calendar week, five school days may be counted if the total number of hours of instructional time is equal to or exceeds 20 hours, including recess, excluding lunch. The term "instructional time" used in these rules may not be applicable to prekindergarten, where "instruction" cannot be differentiated from play and physical activity and rest are developmental requirements.

#### **Recommendations for Alignment with K-2 Regulations**

Review and revise, if needed, update Vermont statutes for mandatory compulsory attendance and length of day for grades K, 1 and 2.

Use this opportunity to review, update, and define terms that don't apply as readily to prekindergarten, where "play" is not differentiated from "learning" – including terms such as "instructional time", "extracurricular", and "school day".

Consider Head Start definitions of full time hours to make recommendations for prekindergarten hours.

### ***Out-of-School Care***

If state-funded prekindergarten programs become full-school-day and full-school-year, a new population of prekindergarten students will need afterschool and summer programs. While some children will likely still be served in full-day, full-year community-based UPK partner programs, many will be more likely to be served at school-based programs. As a result, Vermont's afterschool and summer programs will need to have capacity for four-year-olds and/or more early childhood child care programs will need to provide afterschool and summer care; these changes would typically require significant modifications to a program's offerings and financial model. Currently, prekindergarten offered in center-based and home child care settings provides

flexibility by offering a spot that seamlessly transitions from the 10 hours per week of state-funded prekindergarten to full-day and full-year care when needed. There are also examples of public-school prekindergartens that partner with community-based providers to operate a program at the school, which can also alleviate transition concerns. That said, the question is whether the needed capacity for afterschool, summer and any other non-school day (in-service, vacation, parent/teacher conferences) can be provided in the new system.

Vermont is currently developing capacity targets for universal afterschool and summer programming, and would need to adjust those targets if four-year-olds are to be included in the model. Additionally, most out-of-school time program settings are already operating with a waitlist, so there is not excess capacity already available.

Presently, programs that provide care and education for Vermont's three- and four-year-olds follow the Licensing Regulations for Center-Based Child Care and Preschool Programs. These include age-appropriate safety and best practices for those age groups. Out-of-school time programs that do not yet serve three- and/or four-year-olds would likely need to make significant changes to follow these regulations, as they currently follow the Afterschool Child Care Program regulations, designed to support children and youth in Kindergarten through early middle school. While many of the regulations are the same, there are differences in safety (equipment age rating), staff qualifications, ratios, supervision and movement within the licensed space (i.e. with or without a buddy, depending on age, brief period for which children and youth may be out of direct supervision by staff, not more than 10 minutes), curriculum and program implementation, sleep and rest accommodations, and facilities (child-sized toilets) that are reflect safety and quality standards.

Some committee members noted that many schools offer before- and after-school care, as well as vacation weeks and summer programming. They suggested removing the CDD Child Care Licensing requirements for Afterschool programs, which cause additional burden to school staff. Committee members also noted that most afterschool and summer programs would still need to follow the appropriate Child Care Licensing regulations during those non-school hours. These programs participate in the Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) to support affordable access to their programming for families and cannot lose access to that critical funding only available to licensed afterschool and summer programs.

## **2. Transition three-year-olds from the current 10-hour prekindergarten benefit to the child care and early education system**

Under Vermont's current Universal Prekindergarten law 16 V.S.A. § 829.b.3, both three-year-old and four-year-old children are entitled to 350 hours/year of state-funding prekindergarten education. Section 2 of Act 76 charges Vermont to transition three-year-olds out of the current prekindergarten benefit and into the child care and early education systems. This change would

have implications on access for three-year olds to prekindergarten education and, for those that need them, access to early childhood special education.

### ***Access for Three-Year-Olds***

Children who attend two years of prekindergarten fare better in school than those who attend one year (Reynolds, 1995; Wen et al., 2012). Given this national research, many committee members disagreed strongly with this aspect of Act 76. Similarly, during interviews, constituents expressed concerns about the potential negative impacts that transitioning three-year-olds out of prekindergarten would have on children and families.

Committee members and constituents worried that, without access to state-funded prekindergarten, fewer three-year-olds would have access to any early care and learning programs before they were an age-eligible four-year-old. Committee members expressed concern about whether families would be able to afford group-based early care and learning experiences even with the expanded income eligibility for Child Care Financial Assistance since there are still significant family co-pays for most families; other families may not qualify at all if they do not have an accepted reason for needing child care. According to a [2019 study of PreK in Vermont](#), that interviewed a sample of parents:

When asked what they would do if publicly-funded PreK were not available, about a third of parents reported that this would not affect their early education arrangements, another third would send their child to a different program or for fewer hours, and another third would not send their child to an early education or child care program at all. This alternative of not sending a child to any early education program was significantly more common for households with a full-time caregiver (50%), and for low and mid-income families (48% and 41%, respectively). This suggests that for some children, access to Vermont's publicly-funded PreK is the only exposure they have to high-quality early learning environments prior to kindergarten entry and, more importantly, they may go without any early education without Act 166.

In addition, committee members and constituents were concerned that options may be limited for families seeking part time programs for three-year-olds because many child care programs are oriented to full-time care. Some constituents were concerned that fewer children would be identified early for specialized needs or developmental concerns thus compressing their services into one year before kindergarten. One principal surveyed by the Committee, for example, shared:

*I am incredibly disappointed that opportunities are going to be taken away from 3 year old children. Our data supports great success from students receiving 2 years of high quality PreK education. Particularly our children with disabilities benefit from 2 years in a consistent classroom setting. Removing 3 year olds from the conversation continues to cause me concern and I fear that it will result in reduced outcomes for children.*



Constituents also worried about the continuity of care for young children who will have to transition to a school-based program at age four and need after care and summer care, and may have siblings in different programs.

During interviews with constituents, Committee members heard that “losing four-year-olds to public schools” could have devastating consequences for community-based prekindergarten programs’ educational and financial models and therefore for the system more broadly. Because early education varies across age groups – with younger children being more resource-intensive – these programs could not simply replace older children by filling slots with younger children. They also worried about a loss of age diversity that supports a healthy early learning environment and consistent educational experience for a child during a key developmental phase. Head Start programs identified a potential strain on their program resources and infrastructure as the program model is based on serving both three- and four-year-olds. If three-year-olds are no longer eligible for prekindergarten, Vermont’s Head Start programs may require additional funding and support to maintain program quality, effectiveness, and reach.

Constituents also suggested that focusing access on four-year-olds could limit investment in the existing mixed delivery system and reduce opportunities for deeper partnerships between school and community-based child care programs. They noted concerns about maintaining program stability and continuity amidst changes to prekindergarten, particularly in a system with considerable existing challenges with resources. Constituents cited the importance of collaboration and communication between oversight agencies, the need for alignment and coordination in transition planning, and the need for ongoing assessment and evaluation to monitor the impact of proposed changes in prekindergarten access.

### Recommendations for Transitioning Three-Year-Olds

Maintain the prekindergarten benefit for both three- year-olds and four-year-olds, and take steps to increase hours, starting with four-year-olds.

#### ***Access to Early Childhood Special Education for Three-Year-Olds***

By federal law, school districts are responsible for finding, evaluating, and providing early childhood special education services for all students who are eligible within their geographic boundaries of the district. When a child 3-6 years of age qualifies for special education services, the funding and provision of services is articulated in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and “follow the child,” regardless of whether they are enrolled in a universal prekindergarten program and no matter what setting they attend for prekindergarten education.

Although federal law requires that children receive services regardless of whether or where they are enrolled in prekindergarten, prekindergarten participation is not mandated and the services

not required to be offered in conjunction with the child's prekindergarten education. Sometimes special education services are provided in the school setting but not within a prekindergarten classroom setting, and sometimes special education services are provided outside of the public school settings either at the child's home or their community-based prekindergarten program. Parents choose where to enroll their child(ren) in early childhood programs and IEP teams determine the least restrictive learning environment (LRE) for the child where the school can offer special education services. If three-year-olds are removed from public-funded prekindergarten, a core resource to support school districts in providing mandated special education services to three-year-olds will be lost.

For children who are enrolled in prekindergarten, according to feedback from constituents, the setting identified as the least restrictive learning environment is sometimes in conflict with the family's choice for prekindergarten. When a parent enrolls their child in a setting outside of the school district geographic boundary, they may forgo special education services or take on responsibility of transporting their child to services away from their prekindergarten program. This complexity, combined with resource shortages in school districts, can result in families having to choose between their preferred prekindergarten program and accessing special education services.

For a system that is already stretched and struggling to meet demand for special education services, the potential of dramatic changes to prekindergarten through Act 76 worried many constituents. Even when school districts develop creative solutions, resource constraints make it difficult to provide early childhood special education services outside of public school settings. Vermont Head Start directors reported that they perceived a reduction in early childhood special education services within the Head Start setting since the enactment of Act 166 (2014). They described this as a hardship for families who then need to manage transportation for their child to and from the LEA mid-day, and is disruptive to children who need consistency and routines to be successful, particularly children on the autism spectrum, with social-emotional and behavioral challenges, or with substantial developmental delays.

In the Committee's survey of superintendents, twenty-nine of forty-two (69%) reported their school district would need to modify the provision of special education services. The following themes emerged related to how service provision would need to be modified and the impact on children and families, namely three-year-olds:

- Impact on vulnerable children: Concerns about impact on most vulnerable families: children with disabilities, special health care needs, English language learners, historically marginalized, etc.
- Service delivery restructure: The need to restructure the entire service delivery model for preK and special education moving toward itinerant, community-based service provision
- Workforce: Concerns about workforce/staffing given the high rates of mental health, behavioral challenges, disabilities, and special health care needs of the existing children

(challenges hiring and finding early childhood special education staff and support staff alongside additional professional development needs).

- Reduction in hours and services: three-year-olds would have less time in an early childhood education setting, negatively impacting socialization and family wellness; The ability for ECSE staff to provide services would decrease due to increased travel and administrative time required.
- Facilities/infrastructure: May require additional classrooms and slots to ensure meeting federal regulations around Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).
- Inclusive Individualized Instruction: Develop inclusive, sensory-rich classrooms with increased individualized instruction and specialized therapies.
- Playgroups: Considerations/exploration of playgroups model.
- Transition planning: Implement robust transition planning for three-year-olds as they move from early intervention services to the public school system, including classroom visits, family meetings, and coordinated service plans.
- Transportation: New travel models would need to be developed to support drop-off and pick-up across public schools and private/community programs and entities.
- Financial impact/cost: Significant time and financial resources required (at odds with Governor's request for school districts to significantly cut budgets); Significant concerns about financial viability of the service delivery model.

Finally, described above, Vermont is experiencing a significant workforce gap in the education sector, which includes special educators serving the K-12 system. Recruitment and retention are some of the biggest challenges not just for special educators but also for speech services, occupational therapy, audiology, and other professionals. Finding more special educators who are trained specifically to provide services for the very youngest learners will present an even greater challenge. And the increased strain on existing resources, constituents worried, may also mean there are fewer special educators available to service children in community-based programs and less support and oversight of special educators in community environments.

### Recommendations for Prekindergarten Special Education Services

Identify districts where families feel well-supported and clear on their prekindergarten special education service options. Build on these innovations and provide supports for districts that are struggling.

Research opportunities for districts to share early childhood special education resources within small regions to ensure efficient and effective support for three-year-old children and reduce challenges with cross-district service provision.

Expand on partnerships between Children's Integrated Services (B-3) and school districts to clarify roles and responsibilities of each when across service agencies to support families

through the transition from Part C to B, and state and federal level controls.

Consider extending eligibility provision for early intervention Part C services (CIS) beyond a child's 3rd birthday. Although a significant undertaking, this would ensure that three-year-olds are served in a way that minimizes disruption and addresses some of the child and family needs, as well as concerns around transitions.

Clearly communicate resources and options clearly to families navigating prekindergarten special education services. Include guidelines on what schools provide and what resources are available through local mental health agencies and private insurance. Assess challenge areas for families with cross-district service needs and determine if there are ways that state and local partners can find solutions together

### **3. Require school districts to ensure four-year-olds whose families choose to access prekindergarten programs have access**

The Law charges school districts with the responsibility of ensuring there is sufficient access to prekindergarten programs to meet the demand of four-year-olds who enroll in the expanded state-funded programs. This charge has capacity implications for infrastructure, the workforce and Vermont border towns.

#### ***Capacity***

The Committee's survey of Vermont school leaders gathered feedback from 42 superintendents, 62 principals, and 13 school board members about how they would create capacity to ensure prekindergarten to all four-year-olds. Overarchingly, survey feedback from school leaders revealed interest and support for expanding to all four-year-olds, along with deep concerns about capacity for implementing the change. One school leader shared, for example, "it would require many hours of thoughtful planning to make this work for our district"; another asked, "Is this really the right time to add an additional burden on struggling school districts?". Still another summarized the tension like this:

*This change to the publicly funded pre-K model will have a positive impact on the well-being of Vermont's children. With that said, in a time when schools are facing staffing, facilities and budget challenges, this change will have many unintended consequences that will impact the efficacy and financial stability of public education in our state.*

Although there is no analysis on exactly how many schools would need to make physical changes to their building(s), concerns about facilities and physical infrastructure requirements prevailed among respondents. School leaders identified needs to retrofit existing classrooms or create new developmentally appropriate physical spaces for four-year-olds (including bathrooms, sinks,

playgrounds, roofing/plumbing, running water, heating/cooling, furniture, and materials, etc.), as well as to address deferred maintenance, create playground space, purchase equipment, furniture, supplies, organization and storage materials, invest in safety, health, compliance infrastructure and space, accommodate food service infrastructure, and address ADA compliance.

The infrastructure challenges were identified by both large and small school districts. Whereas one school administrator wondered, “larger school districts do not have the space or budget to add 7-8 additional classrooms with staffing in order to implement Act 76. I wonder how the state will be able to support this legislation financially?”; another asked “I think that this would be difficult to accomplish in smaller communities where infrastructure can and will be a problem. Where will the classrooms be and how will buildings change to accommodate these new rooms?” The Committee did not have access to a representative from the School Construction Aid Task Force but noted a strong desire to have prekindergarten capacity included in any statewide school construction analysis and initiatives.

School leaders also identified concerns about workforce shortages across sectors. One principle described this challenge:

*It is increasingly difficult to find quality, licensed Early Educators in our area. The last time we hired a PreK teacher we had just one applicant. If we have to provide classroom space for all of our district 4 year olds then we will need to hire at least 2 more licensed early educators and at least 2 more classroom paras.*

Respondents named a wide range of workforce capacity needs that would result from the change, including leadership/directors, qualified ECEs with licenses, ECSE and support staff (Paras, speech, OT, PT, etc.), afterschool providers, UPK Coordinators/point person within SDs/regions, administrative staff and support positions, bus drivers and custodial and food service staff. One superintendent described the workforce complexity in this way:

*Our program currently runs Monday through Thursday. Expanding PreK capacity would mean we would need additional funding to pay teaching assistants for 5 days a week as well as more teaching assistants. We have found from our experience that having 3 adults for 15 students is incredibly helpful in providing the needed support to 3 and 4 years. If we were to expand our classrooms to their full capacity, I would suggest an additional adult in each classroom. Our district would need to expand transportation to 4 year olds for the school year and hire more drivers to possibly transport 3 year olds who need ESCE services at the school. If we changed our model for providing service to 3 year olds at their private programs, we may need to budget for an additional ECSE. We would also have to expand our after school programming to include 4 year olds meaning we could need to hire more after school staff.*

### ***Adjacent State Considerations***

For a small number of families living in Vermont border towns, it's a struggle to access Vermont's state-funded prekindergarten programs. The committee was asked to consider "whether there are areas of the State where prekindergarten education can be more effectively & conveniently furnished in an adjacent state due to geographic considerations."

For example, constituents in Essex County described their rural and predominantly low-income region as a "child care desert" where, according to BFIS data from June 2024, no prekindergarten programs exist to serve eligible children in the district. Instead, many families cross the border to New Hampshire to attend the nearest prekindergarten programs, as well as to access healthcare and K-12 schooling. As a result, these families pay full tuition for prekindergarten, or do not attend prekindergarten education at all. In addition, Vermont is limited in its ability to support the well-being of these children with data collection and connections to service providers of all types. . Constituents from Essex County [proposed a solution](#) to extend the prekindergarten benefit to the New Hampshire school districts where they already have tuition agreements and infrastructure to support adjacent state K-12 public education. Although this solution may present administrative and political challenges, there is precedent for Vermont providing adjacent state tuition. Additionally, due to the relatively small number of impacted families, a case-by-case solution may be sufficient and policy-level change unnecessary.

Some committee members questioned the need for and feasibility of supporting enrollment in prekindergarten in adjacent states. They wondered if there is a comparison of distance traveled out-of-state and the distance traveled by some families and children within rural districts that are geographically large. They also expressed concerns about lack of oversight for program quality in programs out of state and enthusiasm that implementation of all-day prekindergarten for all four-year-old children will ensure that there will be available programming throughout all school districts. Other committee members emphasized the need for flexibility, especially in areas where children attend K-12 out-of-state, to ensure that all Vermont children have access to prekindergarten education.

#### **Recommendations for Ensuring Capacity**

Conduct additional research on demand & capacity.

Collaborate with the School Construction Aid Task Force to ensure that any new construction or school building mitigation considers the district's responsibility to provide all day prekindergarten for all four year old children who wish to access it.

Require districts to articulate implementation plans, including needs & timelines.

Build on what is already in place for adjacent state kindergarten programs. Start with areas

where there is already an interstate agreement and prekindergarten children would attend the same institution for prekindergarten as they will for kindergarten.

Develop equivalent “prequalification” pathways for prekindergarten providers in adjacent states serving children who do not have viable options in Vermont and create a clear definition of ‘viable option’.

#### **4. Allow school districts to choose to provide prekindergarten programs directly within schools, through direct contracting with private programs or other public schools, or through a combination of these options.**

The Law charges school districts to make decisions about where prekindergarten education is furnished – in schools or through contracts with center-based, home child care, or other public school programs.

Vermont’s current Universal Prekindergarten law 16 V.S.A. § 829.b.3 states that “If requested by the parent or guardian of a prekindergarten child, the school district of residence shall pay tuition to a prequalified program operated by a private provider or a public school in another district even if the district of residence operates a prekindergarten education program.” In this model, the family is responsible for finding and choosing prekindergarten education for their child and the school district must pay tuition to any prequalified prekindergarten program selected by the family if the child is not attending a program directly operated by their local school district.

The change proposed in Section 2 of Act 76 gives school districts the opportunity to choose how it would like to implement prekindergarten for its students; the district could choose to serve all children directly or it could serve some students directly and others via a contract. A significant difference is that school districts could choose which prequalified prekindergarten programs they would like to partner with. Based on analysis of prekindergarten data reviewed by the committee, during the 23/24 school year, some schools pay tuition to as many as 48 UPK partner programs (though the average is closer to 15) and some partner programs work with as many as 26 school districts (average is closer to 4).

Committee members pointed out that this change could limit family’s access to prekindergarten, especially if the school district could not provide a prekindergarten space that included full-day, year-round care for families that need it. In addition, families that are already established at a quality UPK partner program may find their district doesn’t partner with the program that works for their family.

Other committee members emphasized that this could also significantly streamline UPK administration for some school districts by providing greater control over the UPK partnership agreements they enter into. Some school districts may reduce the number of UPK partnership agreements and build deeper relationships with fewer programs. However, the impact would vary by district since some districts would still need many partner programs to be able to ensure a prekindergarten spot for every eligible child.



## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

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The sections below integrate all the recommendations embedded in the report above.

### **Build on Vermont's Success**

The Committee agreed that it is critical for Vermont's investments to be grounded in national research on best practices for prekindergarten education. Recommendations include both building on Vermont's current strength areas and working to meet national standards where Vermont currently does not.

- Maintain the current prekindergarten benefit for both three-year-olds and four-year-olds and take steps to expand hours, starting with four-year-olds.
- Ensure that prekindergarten programs continue to exist in a mixed delivery system (center-based, public school, and family child care) settings and that these settings continue to meet the high quality markers identified as best practices.
- Ensure that prekindergarten programs continue to exist in a mixed delivery system (center-based, public school, and family child care) settings and that these settings continue to meet the high quality markers identified as best practices.
- Continue to monitor best practices through Vermont's newly-revised Quality Rating and Improvement System (STARS). CDD and AOE partner with relevant partners to utilize learnings from the implementation of STARS system to better support continuous quality improvement at the system and program levels and utilizing data from CLASS assessments to better develop and target training and support.

### **Build Toward Meeting National Standards**

- Charge agencies to develop transition plans and timelines to meet national benchmarks for lead (classroom) teacher preparation across settings.
- Build and invest in models from other states (and expand access to Vermont programs) that have successfully increased the number of early childhood educator prekindergarten teachers with a bachelor's degree and educator licensure with early childhood education (ECE) endorsement, including options and supports for provisional licensure for educators working in all settings
- Clearly define the coaching requirements and frequency across settings to meet NIEER's benchmark for professional development; consider ways to leverage Vermont's existing coaching and mentoring efforts and models, including initiatives like Early Multi-tiered Systems of Support, Vermont's System for Program Access to Resources for Quality Supports (SPARQS), successful models used by LEA's and the Vermont Early Childhood Network's communities of practice.
- Review and expand Vermont's existing efforts to support pathways to teacher qualifications including the Vermont Higher Education Collaborative, Early Childhood Education Apprenticeship and Youth Apprenticeship programs; Vermont's [Advancing ECE as a Profession](#) initiative; and [Roadmap to Student Success for the Early Childhood](#)

## **Improve Systems & Coordination**

### ***Data Systems***

The Committee's work was significantly impacted by a lack of coordination and access to data and analysis to make informed decisions about prekindergarten education. The Committee recommends strengthening Vermont's capacity for ongoing assessment and evaluation to monitor the delivery and effectiveness of both high-quality child development services as well as access to comprehensive services.

- Task the Agency of Education, Child Development Division, and Building Bright Futures to create/update and implement a new monitoring and accountability protocol including robust research and data collection and analysis process to monitor UPK. The development process should include input from impacted individuals (families, educators, Act 166 Coordinators, Superintendents etc) and include data collected at the program and LEA levels. Data collected should include financial, enrollment by student characteristics, staffing, and student outcomes.
- Agree on a cycle of planning, observation and feedback across agencies that ensures data on classroom quality is systematically collected, and that local programs and the state both use information from the CQIS to help improve policy or practice.
- 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.

### ***Prekindergarten Oversight***

The Committee agreed on these areas where prekindergarten system oversight and coordination could be improved.

- Consider creating a state-level UPK Collaborative with representation from education, human services, Head Start, child care, and Building Bright Futures (similar to West Virginia's model) to guide ongoing UPK policy and implementation.
- Assess and clarify the role of prekindergarten coordinators, including defining the expertise and time commitment required to benefit families, districts and the prekindergarten system.
- Assess and implement systems to efficiently support mixed delivery such as development of a standard contract for UPK partners, alignment between state systems for educator qualifications and continuing education, and further review of interaction between child care licensing requirements and UPK .

### ***PreK-2 Regulations***

- Review and revise, if needed, update Vermont statutes for mandatory compulsory attendance and length of day for grades K, 1 and 2.

- Use this opportunity to review, update, and define terms that don't apply as readily to prekindergarten, where "play" is not differentiated from "learning" – including terms such as "instructional time", "extracurricular", and "school day".
- Consider Head Start definitions of full time hours to make recommendations for prekindergarten hours.

### ***Prekindergarten Special Education***

- Identify districts where families feel well-supported and clear on their prekindergarten special education service options. Build on these innovations and provide supports for districts that are struggling.
- Research opportunities for districts to share early childhood special education resources within small regions to ensure efficient and effective support for three-year-old children and reduce challenges with cross-district service provision.
- Expand on partnerships between Children's Integrated Services (B-3) and school districts to clarify roles and responsibilities of each when across service agencies to support families through the transition from Part C to B, and state and federal level controls.
- Consider extending eligibility provision for early intervention Part C services (CIS) beyond a child's 3rd birthday. Although a significant undertaking, this would ensure that three-year-olds are served in a way that minimizes disruption and addresses some of the child and family needs, as well as concerns around transitions.
- Clearly communicate resources and options clearly to families navigating prekindergarten special education services. Include guidelines on what schools provide and what resources are available through local mental health agencies and private insurance. Assess challenge areas for families with cross-district service needs and determine if there are ways that state and local partners can find solutions together

### **Ensure Adequate Resources**

- Commission analysis of Vermont's pupil weight for prekindergarten.
- Use the cost-of-care analysis commissioned by CDD to create a new methodology to establish and update prekindergarten payments made to non-school-based prekindergarten programs for the 25/26 school year and beyond.
- Model anticipated systems-level costs for prekindergarten at various hours and delivery models before making major changes to prekindergarten.
- Conduct additional research on demand & capacity
- Collaborate with the School Construction Aid Task Force to ensure that any new construction or school building mitigation considers the district's responsibility to provide all day prekindergarten for all four year old children who wish to access it.
- Require districts to articulate implementation plans, including needs & timelines.
- Build on what is already in place for adjacent state kindergarten programs. Start with areas where there is already an interstate agreement and prekindergarten children would attend the same institution for prekindergarten as they will for kindergarten.

- Develop equivalent “prequalification” pathways for prekindergarten providers in adjacent states serving children who do not have viable options in Vermont and create a clear definition of ‘viable option’.

## **Continue the Work**

A key area of agreement across the Committee is that significant work remains to create a realistic and responsive implementation plan for expanding access to high-quality prekindergarten education and stabilizing the current early care and education system.

### ***Implementation Workgroup***

- Create a working group that has the capacity, ability, and policy experience to create an implementation plan, update statute, and draft legislative language.
- Continue the Committee’s work within the Commission on the Future of Public Education. Any changes to education funding or structural needs in Vermont’s public education or early care and learning system should happen in tandem with respect to both planning and implementation.

### ***Further Study***

The Committee identified several areas of research and data collection that were beyond their capacity but will require planning and implementation moving forward. These include:

- Building a new monitoring and accountability protocol to collaboratively monitor UPK across the Agency of Education, Child Development Division, and Building Bright Futures with support from the [Early Childhood Data and Evaluation Strategic Plan Committee](#) utilizing the following documents as starting points:
  - [Data Needed for PreK Decision Making](#), an inventory of questions and areas of future study
  - The Act 76 Section 2c report requirements
  - [Data Development Agenda for UPK](#)
  - [Vermont Universal Prekindergarten Education \(UPK\) Data, Publications, Reports, and Resources](#), Updated November 2024: Compilation of most recent data and information on UPK
  - [Vermont’s Vision for Early Childhood Data Integration](#), prioritizing aligned and collaborative data collection and data linking across intersecting early childhood systems
- Conduct an analysis of financial resources required to expand or adapt UPK outlined in the “Data Needed for PreK Decision Making” document and reiterated in the data provided by the Committee’s survey of superintendents
  - how much full-school-day and full-school-year UPK for four-year-olds would cost school districts for both start-up infrastructure and ongoing costs.
- Review existing reports on deferred maintenance in public schools alongside a full evaluation on current UPK offerings, readiness for change, and infrastructure/facility needs

statewide

- The cost-of-care analysis commissioned by CDD to create a new way to establish and update prekindergarten payments made to non-school-based prekindergarten programs for the 25/26 school year and beyond.
- Commission an analysis of Vermont's pupil weight for prekindergarten
- Model anticipated systems-level costs for prekindergarten at various hours and delivery models before making major changes to prekindergarten
- Review and discuss **statutes** for mandatory offerings and length of day for K, 1 & 2 alongside discussing expanding and/or adapting UPK
- Establish and utilize a workforce registry

## STANDARD CONTRACT

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TBD

## LEGISLATIVE LANGUAGE

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TBD

## REFERENCES

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## GLOSSARY

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TBD

The following terms and acronyms are specific to Vermont and/or early childhood systems:

- Act 76 =
- Act 166 = Vermont’s universal prekindergarten law from
- ADM - Average Daily Membership =
- AHS - Agency of Human Services =
- AOE - Agency of Education =
- CCFAP - Child Care Financial Assistance Program =
- CDD - Child Development Division =
- CDA - Child Development Associate Credential = entry level qualification in early childhood education
- CLASS =
- ESCE = Early Childhood Special Education Services
- Head Start =
- IDEA =
- Part B/Part C =
- Mixed delivery system =

- NIEER - National Institute of Early Education Research =
- NAEYC - National Association for the Education of Young Children =
- PEIC - Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee =
- Publicly funded prekindergarten =
- TSG - Teaching Strategies Gold =
- UPK - Universal Prekindergarten =
- VELs - Vermont Early Learning Standards =
- VTNEA - Vermont-National Education Association =
- IEP - Individual Education Plan =
- Child Find = find, evaluate, serve children with disabilities

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## APPENDIX

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