

October 27, 2023

Dear esteemed members of the ACT 76 Prekindergarten Implementation Committee,

Thank you for all the diligent work you do to serve families with young children in Vermont.

My name is Betsy Barstow and I am a licensed teacher in the fields of early childhood education and art. I live in the East Montpelier side of Adamant where I am a registered family child care home provider and an ACT 166 Pre-K partner. My program Nature's Ninxs takes place on 81 acres of fields and forest and is also a Spanish language program, offering both a bi-lingual session and a Spanish Immersion session. I was inspired to create Nature's Ninxs with the advent of ACT 166 in 2016. It was appealing to me that all Vermont's children could receive 10 hours of Pre-K per week for the school year regardless of income. I designed my program so that the days are 5 hours long in a two day session and planned an in-depth two year curriculum. Tuition is fully covered by the universal Pre-K funding. Many of the families I serve have one parent in the economic workforce and one in the home. The Pre-K funding makes it possible for children to receive the benefits of attending Nature's Ninxs who might not otherwise be financially able to attend a private Pre-K. Additionally, a number of children who have attended are native Spanish speakers, some of whom Spanish is their first language.

I am concerned about some of the proposals in ACT 76, in particular the end of ACT 166 funding. I feel that it is crucial that the work requirement for CCFAP (child care financial assistance program) be discontinued, so that families with a stay-at-home parent would be able to access assistance in paying for private Pre-K programs, such as mine. Additionally, my program's viability and sustainability depends on the current mixed delivery aspect of the universal pre-K program, and the children in my program benefit from a mix of 3 and 4 year olds with a two year curriculum, so undoing the current Act 166 would have a huge impact on my program.

Here is a statement from Diana Calle of Montpelier whose twin sons attended Nature's Ninxs for two years.

*"It was a great blessing for our boys that there was a program like Nature Ninxs available at all here in Vermont. A program that offers Spanish like they speak at home and Latin culture in a nature setting was exactly what we were looking for and if there had been a cost attached, it would have been prohibitive for us to send our kids there. Ms Betsy did a great job. I doubt I'd have felt comfortable sending them to a pre k full time in the school, even if it had been available at that time. The fact that my 3 year old twins were going to be understood in their main and only language from the beginning of the school year gave me, as their mother, a great comfort."*

It is my hope that Nature's Ninxs will be able to continue beyond 2025. Part of making that possible, would be eliminating the work requirement in order to be eligible for the CCFAP, so that families can access the Pre-K program that best suits their needs or better yet, leaving ACT 166 intact.

Thank you for your consideration and all your hard work.

Sincerely,

Betsy Barstow

Pre-K Teacher

Nature's Ninxs

<http://naturesninxs.weebly.com>