



Date: October 4, 2021
To: Secretary French, Deputy Secretary Bouchey, Kate Rogers, Commissioner Brown, Deputy Commissioner Gray
cc: Kendal Smith, Director of Policy and Legislative Affairs, Governor Scott's Office
From: Dr. Morgan Crossman, Executive Director, Building Bright Futures
Re: Considerations for UPK under the American Families Plan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As stated by a national leader during the Early Childhood Leadership Summit,
"When you're trying to change the system, BE BOLD, do NOT be afraid to fail. You need to hold the vision, set the strategy, set expectations, name outcomes and be committed to getting it done. Don't provide a window or opportunity for people to question whether it can be done. It can and it should be done to make progress and improve outcomes." -
Chris Jones, Executive Director | North Dakota Office of the Governor; Department of Human Services

We have an exciting opportunity to build the early childhood system we all envision over the next few years.

- Vermont is currently a leader in providing universal prekindergarten education in a mixed delivery model (public and private settings) for 3 and 4-year-olds
- The number of hours of UPK (10 hrs/wk) still represents a challenge in equitable access
- Vermont is operating in a workforce crisis for early childhood education while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic which has also changed parent need/preferences
- Vermont still struggles to utilize data to demonstrate the impact of and inform policy decisions surrounding Act 166 and UPK as it relates to implementation and outcomes for children

OVERVIEW

Over the last few weeks, Building Bright Futures has been closely monitoring the reconciliation bill as it relates to universal prekindergarten education (UPK) and child care. We convened with Agency leaders and private partners across a range of sectors representing early childhood education, alongside reviewing existing data to compile the following as it relates to UPK:

1. Opportunities for UPK using the Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP) as a guide
2. Data Vermont needs to be able to effectively make decisions about how to move forward with UPK
3. Questions and considerations for our congressional delegates and federal partners

Individuals representing the following groups provided feedback: Vermont Principals Association, Let's Grow Kids, Act 166/Special Education Coordinator, Vermont School Boards Association, Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators, the Department for Children and Families, the Child Development Division, the Vermont Agency of Education's Early Childhood Education team, and select members of the State Advisory Council. We look forward to engaging a broader group of stakeholders and partners on this issue as the bill moves forward and evolves.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR UNIVERSAL PREKINDERGARTEN EDUCATION

Vermont aspires to realize the promise of each and every Vermont child by ensuring that the early childhood system is an integrated, continuous, comprehensive, high quality system of services that is equitable, accessible and will improve outcomes for children in the prenatal period to age eight and their families. This is a system where all children have a healthy start. Where families and communities play a leading role in children's well-being. Where families have access to high quality opportunities that meet their needs. And where the early childhood system is integrated, well resourced and data-informed. This is the future. - Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan.

Each of the themes outlined below reflect both the challenges and opportunities for our existing early childhood system as it relates to UPK. We need to be thoughtful about how we use this opportunity to vision how our child care and early childhood education programs are funded, integrated, and monitored.

Workforce & Capacity

- Ensuring the state has a diverse workforce and that a diverse group of aspiring early childhood educators have access to affordable or no-cost training, education and opportunities to become licensed
- Highly qualified, well-trained, and well-compensated workforce
 - Including those providing wrap around services and supports to the UPK system

Administration and Integration

- True integration between care for infants and toddler (birth to age three) and preschool aged children (three to five year olds) as it relates to seamless transitions for families
 - Partnership and alignment between pre-K and Kindergarten programs in order to ensure smooth transitions for families and children during this period
- Leveraging Head Start as a model to bolster family engagement practices and wrap around service offerings in the UPK system. As well as looking to Head Start program's quality standards and curriculum practices as a benchmark.
- Efficiency in management, regulations, and administration
- Clear and consistent communication from agencies overseeing the program to public and private partners

Hours/Dosage

- 10 hours a week isn't enough to meet many families' needs. (**Note questions below about required dosage/hrs*)
 - Based on recent UPK focus groups, there isn't consensus on the appropriate number of hours for pre-K, however, partners consistently agree that 10 hours/week is insufficient
- Considerations of school year vs. calendar year services are also important
 - How does the system accommodate the remaining hours or parts of the year that families may need care?
 - Can families opt to participate in the pre-K program if they are looking for fewer hours than it allows for?

Equitable Access

- Every child will have access to a prepared, knowledgeable, skilled early educator regardless of the setting in which they receive UPK (Equitable access regardless of geographic location, specialized health care or developmental needs, family preferences, etc.)
 - Address regional variations in access to programs, and determine creative solutions, including transportation options to ensure rural communities are equitably served
- High-quality, inclusive practices within programs
 - Extend Act 35 to private settings
 - Examine communication of expectations for programs to ensure high quality data reporting and monitoring of suspension and expulsion
- Connection to communities, including effective messaging and awareness efforts that ensure all families are aware of eligibility

Diversity

- Ensure UPK programs and their staff honor and support each family’s culture, structure and preferences.
- Ensure that UPK programs and wrap around services have a diverse workforce and are representative of the families and children they are serving

Infrastructure

- Facilities: consider how to create modern, safe, and forward thinking building environments
 - Including those needed for potential wrap around services (kitchens, health care/nurse’s offices, etc.)
- Data: need for monitoring systems to document indicators on capacity, need, process, and outcomes. See below

DATA NEEDED TO INFORM DECISION-MAKING

**Note: For a more complete list of data gaps in Vermont’s Early Childhood system navigate to the following link:*

<https://vermontkidsdata.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Needs-Assessment-Data-Gaps.pdf>

DATA NEEDED

Need/Demand

- The enrollment for UPK has changed over time. How do we measure and monitor trends in demand? What does current utilization tell us, and what further data do we need to truly understand demand?
- What is required of the system to provide more access based on the current demand?

Enrollment/Unitization

- What is the current enrollment across settings, regions, and by demographic characteristics?
- Overall [enrollment trends](#)

Workforce & Capacity

- Examine potential UPK regional variation in licensed capacity including variation among public vs. private programs
- How many children by age can be served currently?
 - By program type and by region
 - Total # served
 - Part-time and full-time enrollment
 - Waitlists
 - Vacancies
 - By subsidy status
 - By demographic characteristics
 - If a program is staffed as is licensed or intended, vs current staffing (given short staffing/workforce challenges)
- What capacity would we need to build in order to meet the need of all 3 and 4 year olds having access to 30 hrs/week of UPK across settings? 40 hrs/week? Full year capacity?
 - Where would the capacity need to be built?
 - How could we ensure that family choice in a mixed delivery system remains a priority?
 - What capacity would we need to build to transition to calendar year pre-K? How would this work with our public providers?
- What is the current status of the # of licensed educators in the classroom vs. variances/shared licensed teachers, etc.?
 - How would this look if UPK hours were to expand, would this policy need to be reexamined to align with the availability of the workforce?

Cost

- What is the true cost to provide UPK across settings?
 - Challenges associated with .46 ADM and implications of increasing hours/week
 - ECSE and admin costs cannot be separated from overall PK-3 costs
- What does cost sharing and a state match for Vermont look like under this program?
- Keeping family affordability as a goal
 - Where does the bill's estimate of saving families \$13,000 a year on average originate from?
- What is the cost of providing wrap around services - (family and child mental health, Part B, Social determinants of health screenings and connection to resources, CACFP)

Success/Outcomes

- How do we define success in UPK?
 - Programmatic success
 - Overall of Act 166
 - Process measures
- What outcomes are most important?
 - Teaching strategies gold (TSGold)
 - Ready for Kindergarten (R4K!)
 - Literacy: 3rd grade math and reading

- What else?

EXISTING DATA, RESOURCES & PUBLICATIONS

- Vermont Agency of Education's [Enrollment Dashboard](#)
- [Enrollment rates of children in universal prekindergarten programs in Vermont in 2016/17](#) - A Publication of the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance at IES, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands At Education Development Center, January 2020
- [Prekindergarten Education Study: Final Report](#) - Vermont Agency of Education, July 2019
- [Pupil Weighting Factors Report: Report to the House and Senate Committees on Education, the House Committee on Ways and Means, and the Senate Committee on Finance](#) - Vermont Agency of Education, December 2019
- [Characteristics of Approved Universal Prekindergarten Programs in Vermont in 2018/19](#) - A Publication of the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance at IES, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands At Education Development Center, January 2021
- [Determination of the Statewide Rate for Pre-K Tuition](#)
- Ready for Kindergarten! Survey: [R4K!S UPK Data](#)
- Vermont's Early Childhood Resource, Data, and Policy Center (vermontkidsdata.org)
 - [Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan Data Dashboard](#)
 - [The number of children enrolled in Universal Prekindergarten Education](#) (VECAP Goal 3, Development and Education Outcomes)
- [Vermont's 2020 Early Childhood Needs Assessment](#)
- UPK [GIS mapping tool developed by AIR](#)
- [BBF's Universal Prekindergarten \(UPK\) Webinar - February 2020](#)
- [BBF Testimony on the findings of Building Bright Futures' information gathering effort on Universal Prekindergarten \(UPK\)](#)
- [BBF Testimony to the Task Force on the Implementation of the Pupil Weighting Factors Report](#) August 2021
- [Guiding Principles and Equity Resources](#)
- [2019](#) and [2020](#) How are Vermont's Young Children and Families Reports - Building Bright Futures

QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Programmatic Questions

- Is there a requirement around hours of UPK per week?
 - Will public and private PreK programs need to offer full day programming to qualify and how many hours will that be? Coupled with that question is, is it school year or calendar year? The bill said 1020 hours annually (currently UPK

provides 350 hours annually) which would not be full-time care for children with parents that need closer to 9 hours of care to allow for a commute. We need clarification on the intent of providing care vs PreK education within this bill to understand the fiscal implications as highlighted in (b) above versus expenses that would be incurred by the CDD.

- Could “annual hours” mean full year UPK? What are the implications?
- One section references 1,020 hrs related to HS (pg 249)
- One section references the transition from half-day to full-day programs (pg 259)
- Is there any guidance or requirements around school year vs. calendar year pre-K services?
- What capacity and funding is needed to move to a full-day program?
- How do we ensure the ability to build on the existing UPK program?
 - Access for 5-year-olds not net eligible for Kindergarten
- How do current UPK program standards translate into this federal program?
- What other components of pre-K can we fund through this program in order to continue to serve more children, more equitably, at higher quality, etc.
 - Transportation as a significant need to ensure equitable access
- The bill states that the state must target higher need communities first, we would want to make sure this didn’t preclude us from supporting our existing UPK providers if they were not in one of these communities given VT is already universal. However, targeting higher need communities could be enhanced.

Logistical Questions

- Eligibility
 - Are states with preexisting universal pre-K programs eligible for funding?
 - Current answer: Yes, states should build on their existing programs
 - Can current pre-K systems and infrastructure be built upon?
 - Current answer: Yes, states should build on their existing infrastructure, especially those states with existing universal mixed delivery programs
- Match
 - What funds do we have available to list as a match? How will Vermont’s current investments be examined in the context of a match?
 - Discussion of Match threshold and what Vermont would accept responsibility for
 - Where can we be creative with a match and how does this map to ADM?
 - What current funds would be considered eligible as a match, vs. which might be considered supplanting?
 - What portion of funding increased wages for staff will Vermont be responsible for?
- Funding
 - How does ADM interact with UPK?
 - What would funding provisions look like for a state with 2 lead agencies?
 - Implications on funding given our state’s dual agency oversight

- Can funding be used to hire more staff to support programmatic components?
 - Does a state need to “opt in” in year 1 in order to receive all funding or is it possible to apply for funding in year 2?
 - What portion of funding salaries will Vermont be responsible for? From the bill it looks like Vermont would receive 100% reimbursement for the first 3 years and then it would taper to a 60/40 split in 2028, but this ties into the question above about whether we would need new money or could use our existing funding to support this 40% gap.
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- What does the formal application process look like, what would reporting entail, and how often would we need to apply/report/demonstrate outcomes over 10 years?
 - IS there anything that prevents the state from mandating UPK?
 - Timeline: ECSA will be complete 7/1/22, Finance study following year, when we will need to accept the Federal \$ (may need to make decisions before ECSA is complete)

Additional Considerations

- How can we think strategically about federal funding in aligning/integrating child care, UPK, and afterschool/out-of-school-time to build a seamless system with limited transitions for kids?
- How does the bill address the challenge of cross district service provision and IDEA issues (equitable access for children with disabilities)
- What models and infrastructure do other states have in place that Vermont can learn from: governance, administration, grant programs, etc.?

As Vermont continues to move toward our vision for the early childhood system, it is my hope that we think big and bold. Please consider the following quote from another national leader as we embark on the next steps.

“We’re looking at a once in a century type of federal investment to transform the system for early learning and education. This is a time to be bold. We need to pay attention to science and communities and move toward a system that meets the needs of each and every child.” - Lynette M. Fraga, Ph.D., Chief Executive Office, Child Care Aware of America

I look forward to your partnership and am excited for this opportunity to build on Vermont’s existing commitment to early childhood education!

Sincerely,



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