

PreKindergarten Education Implementation Committee

DRAFT Report to the Legislature

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Committee Charge

The Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee (PEIC) 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-old¹ children on a full-day basis on or before July 1, 2026. The law outlines four key changes to prekindergarten education from the Universal Prekindergarten program created in Act 166 of 2014:

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 ten-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 Committee was charged with examining the current delivery of prekindergarten education in Vermont and making recommendations on how to implement the changes above. The charge also required the Committee to focus its analysis on ten considerations.

Considerations

The Committee focused their analysis and resulting recommendations on these considerations:

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.

¹ This report uses “four-year-old” to mean a child who is 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 is five years of age and not yet enrolled in kindergarten

Other issues the Committee deemed relevant were:

- a. The changes necessary to transition children who are three years of age from the 10-hour prekindergarten benefit to child care & early education²; and
- b. Special education services for 3 year olds.

Membership

The PEIC was co-chaired by:

- Heather Bouchey, Deputy Secretary of Education (with designee Meg Porcella); and
- Janet McLaughlin, Deputy Commissioner of the Child Development Division.

Committee membership consisted of:

- Sandra Cameron, Associate Executive Director of the Vermont School Board Association;
- Sherry Carlson, Executive Officer of Let's Grow Kids;
- Morgan Crossman, Executive Director of Building Bright Futures;
- Jeff Francis, 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 (and designee Donna Brown);
- Mary Lundeen, Executive Director of the Vermont Council of Special Education; Administrators (previously designated to Pam Reed);
- 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).

A member from the School Construction Aid Task Force was not filled as a Committee position.

² As stated in Act 76 Sect. 2(c) Powers and duties.

Context

The Committee's process was impacted by Vermont's shifting policy and education context. Last session (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. The urgency of addressing an education funding and structural crisis for the entire education system in Vermont, per the Commission's charge, should be neither minimized nor overlooked when considering changes to the public prekindergarten system. Rather, any anticipated changes to either system should happen in tandem with respect to both planning and implementation.

In addition, it is important to note that, leading up to the passage of Act 76, stakeholders offered differing views for the future of public prekindergarten from the outset. 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 longstanding tensions between the private child care space and the public education system that had not been assuaged prior to the bill's passage. Fortunately, the work of this Committee has served an important role in bringing multiple stakeholders together, each with potentially different visions for the future of public prekindergarten in Vermont. We are pleased that we have achieved consensus on many, though not all, recommendations.

Committee Process

Planning and Administration

The Agency of Education and Agency of Human Services provided administrative, technical, fiscal and legal support to the Committee. The Agency of Education retained Molly Loomis, PhD of [Moloco LLC](#) to assist with process planning, meeting facilitation, data synthesis and report writing. A Planning Team comprised of the committee co-chairs Heather Bouchey and Janet McLaughlin, along with AOE designee Meg Porcella and facilitator Molly Loomis, met monthly to plan agendas, track progress, synthesize information, and draft the report.

Committee Meetings

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 in Montpelier to review and discuss the draft recommendations. All meeting information is posted on the [Agency of Education's website](#).

The Committee developed and agreed that the following group agreements would guide their work together as a PEIC:

- Focus on what's best for children;
- Respect and make space for multiple voices & perspectives;
- Ground decisions in data, research and experience;
- Normalize and expect disagreement; and
- Speak plainly, directly and honestly.

Workgroups

In addition to attending monthly Committee meetings, each Committee member participated in one of three Workgroups 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 below.

Stakeholder Engagement

The PEIC process was designed to leverage the experience and perspectives of Committee members who represented a range of prekindergarten stakeholders and constituencies. Although the process did not provide staffing or funding for deep community engagement, the Committee consulted with stakeholders throughout the process to gather additional feedback from those who will be most impacted by prekindergarten system changes.

Committee members [conducted group interviews](#) with agency leaders, VTNEA and community-based prekindergarten teachers, Head Start leaders and educators, prekindergarten coordinators, and superintendents to assess their needs and interests in the changes proposed by Act 76. Committee members also participated in conversations with educators in Essex County to understand the experiences of families with limited prekindergarten access and the potential to attend prekindergarten programs in an adjacent state. We held a discussion with the Early Childhood Strategic Plan Families and Communities Committee Co-chairs and committee members about early childhood special education, as well as hosted experts from AOE and CDD to meet and share feedback. We also invited expert stakeholders to attend meetings and speak about the current state of prekindergarten in Vermont, national best practices in universal prekindergarten, available data to understand Vermont's prekindergarten capacity, and prekindergarten teacher qualification. Committee members reviewed [stakeholder feedback on S.56](#), which was collected by BBF and categorized by themes.

In addition, consistent with VT 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 PEIC work throughout the process. Committee members were asked to read all written feedback as part of the deliberative, collaborative process.

Report

This report integrates workgroup findings, stakeholder feedback, and member input on each of the considerations outlined by Act 76. The Planning Team drafted the first version of this report in August for the full Committee to review and discuss in-person on September 10, 2024. Feedback from this meeting, along with input from Committee members unable to be present on September 10, [will be] integrated into a second draft and reviewed by the Committee in October. Final edits [will be] made in November and the report submitted to the House Committees on Education and on Human Services and the Senate Committees on Education and on Health and Welfare by the deadline of December 1, 2024.

The report below begins with describing the Committee's commitment to prioritizing and framing the work around what is best for children. It then outlines analysis and recommendations related to each consideration, organized by topic area: 1) considerations related to program quality, 2) system-level considerations, and 3) considerations related to capacity and funding. The report concludes with a summary discussion and overarching recommendations for implementation.

Program Quality Considerations

The Committee explored two considerations related to program quality: benchmarks and best practices to ensure high-quality prekindergarten education, and special education services for children participating in prekindergarten in public & private settings.

Benchmarks & best practices to ensure high-quality prekindergarten education

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](#), and the [Head Start Performance Standards](#). We compared the quality standards of each tool with Vermont's requirements for public school, center-based, family child care prekindergarten programs. Results were documented in a [Program Quality Matrix](#) and summarized below. Table 1 Compares Vermont's prekindergarten requirements against these three tools for prekindergarten quality standards in eleven policy areas.

Table 1: Comparison of Vermont’s Prekindergarten Requirements and National Quality Standards

PreK Policy	Vermont Requirement	National Quality Standard
Early Learning & Development Standards	Vermont requires all preK programs to use Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS), which align with national benchmarks, and to conduct aligned child-level assessments 2x/year using TS GOLD	<p>✓ <u>NIEER</u>: Comprehensive, aligned, supported, culturally sensitive</p> <p>✓ <u>NAEYC</u>: Aligned, promotes learning in: social, emotional, physical, language & cognitive</p> <p>✓ <u>Head Start</u>: Research-based, comprehensive, inclusive, focused on social & emotional development, language & literacy, cognition & physical development</p>
Curriculum Supports	Vermont requires locally-selected curricula to be evidence-based and aligned with VELs; the state provides guidance, materials and technical support and monitors compliance ³	<p>✓ <u>NIEER</u>: Approval process or guidance & supports for implementation</p> <p>✓ <u>NAEYC</u>: Developmentally, culturally & linguistically appropriate; effective teaching approaches for child’s goals</p> <p>✓ <u>Head Start</u>: Standardized training; materials for implementation</p>
Lead Teacher⁴ Degree	Public school programs require a BA but center-based and family child care programs do not.	<p>✗ <u>NIEER</u>: BA at minimum</p> <p>✓ <u>NAEYC</u>: Undefined</p> <p>✗ <u>Head Start</u>: No less than 50% of teachers must have a BA in ECE, CDA, or equivalent</p>
Assistant Teacher⁵ Degree	Vermont does not detail requirements for assistant teachers or paraprofessionals in preK classrooms	<p>✗ <u>NIEER</u>: CDA or equivalent</p> <p>✓ <u>NAEYC</u>: Undefined</p> <p>✗ <u>Head Start</u>: Preschool CDA</p>
Teacher Specialized Training	Vermont requires that lead teachers have specialized training in early childhood education and/or child development, such as ECE, CD, Elem.	<p>✓ <u>NIEER</u>: Specializing in preK (ECE or child development)</p> <p>✓ <u>NAEYC</u>: Undefined</p>

³ Information drawn results of NIEER’s annual survey, found in [2023 NIEER Yearbook Appendix](#)

⁴ The terms used for prekindergarten educators vary across public school and community-based settings. This report defines “lead teacher” as the teacher in the classroom primarily in charge of delivering instruction

⁵ The terms used for prekindergarten educators vary across settings. This report defines “assistant teacher” as an adult supporting the teacher who is primarily in charge of delivering instruction

PreK Policy	Vermont Requirement	National Quality Standard
	Ed with ECE, ECE SpEd	✓ <u>Head Start</u> : At least an AA in ECE, CD, or equivalent
Staff Professional Development	Child care licensing requires at least 15 hours annually of approved PDT; AOE licensed teachers requires 45 hours of PD in 3 years if Level 1 or 90 hours of professional development if Level 2 (in 5 years)	✓ <u>NIEER</u> : At least 15 hours/year; individualized PD plan, coaching ✓ <u>NAEYC</u> : Ongoing staff development ✓ <u>Head Start</u> : At least 16 hours/year; individualized PD plan, coaching
Staff:Child Ratio	1:10 (3- & 4-year olds)	✓ <u>NIEER</u> : 1:10 ✓ <u>NAEYC</u> : 1:10 ✓ <u>Head Start</u> : 1:10
Screening & Referral	Child care licensing and SU/SD policies for enrollment require documentation of screenings for vision, hearing & other health interventions; referral required if child presents with an issue	✓ <u>NIEER</u> : Vision, hearing & health screenings & referral ✓ <u>NAEYC</u> : Promotes nutrition & health; protect children & staff from illness ✓ <u>Head Start</u> : Vision, hearing & health screenings, referral and support
Continuous Quality Improvement System	Vermont requires programs to achieve 4 or 5 stars through STARS (includes a formal portfolio and an onsite observation using an evidence-based assessment tool (currently CLASS).	✓ <u>NIEER</u> : Structured classroom observations; data used for program improvement ✓ <u>NAEYC</u> : Formal & informal assessment; child data ✓ <u>Head Start</u> : Annual self- assessment; data used for program improvement; child data
Safety	CDD's Child Care Licensing Regulations require age-appropriate safety protocols re: physical program location, supervision of children, emergency planning +	✓ <u>NAEYC</u> : Regulations re: facility, furnishings, supervision, sanitation & emergency plans ✓ <u>Head Start</u> : Regular safety checks, staff safety training, emergency response plan, background checks
Relationships	VELS focus on adult-child relationships; CLASS tool assesses adult-child interactions; STARS includes family engagement; Child care licensing focus on adult, child & family relationships	✓ <u>NAEYC</u> : Positive adult-child relationships; collaborative & responsive family engagement ✓ <u>Head Start</u> : Inclusive & responsive family engagement; family participation in program; information transparency

Table 1 shows that Vermont already has benchmarks in place to ensure high quality prekindergarten education in most nationally defined areas. However, there are three areas where Vermont does not currently meet national standards: teacher degree, assistant teacher degree, and staff professional development. Table 2 summarizes how prekindergarten requirements for each of these areas vary across program settings.

Table 2: Vermont’s Prekindergarten Teacher Preparation Requirements Across Settings

Lead Teacher⁶ Degree Requirements in Vermont Prekindergarten Settings	
<p>Public school programs: 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</p>	<p>✓ Public school programs exceed national benchmark of BA plus specialized training in preK</p>
<p>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 during UPK hours</p>	<p>✗ Center-based programs do not meet national benchmark of BA plus specialized training in preK</p>
<p>Family child care programs: Registered programs are required to complete Vermont’s 45 hour Fundamentals for Early Childhood Professionals course; licensed 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</p>	<p>✗ Family child care programs do not meet national benchmark of BA plus specialized training in preK</p>
Assistant Teacher⁷ Degree Requirements in Vermont Prekindergarten Settings	
<p>Vermont does not detail requirements for assistant teachers or paraprofessionals 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</p>	<p>✗ Vermont preK programs do not meet national benchmark of CDA or equivalent for assistant teachers</p>
Staff Professional Development Requirements in Vermont Prekindergarten Settings	
<p>Public school programs: Child care licensing and AOE teacher licensure require ongoing professional development, but there are not statewide standards related to practice-based coaching nor resources allocated to support that coaching.</p>	<p>✗ Does not meet national benchmark of least 15 hours/year, individualized PD plans <i>and</i> coaching</p>
<p>Center-based programs: Child care licensing and AOE teacher licensure require ongoing professional development, but there are not statewide standards related to practice-based coaching nor resources allocated to</p>	<p>? May not meet national benchmark of least 15 hours/year, individualized</p>

⁶ The terms used for prekindergarten educators vary across public school and community-based settings. This report defines “lead teacher” as the teacher in the classroom primarily in charge of delivering instruction

⁷ The terms used for prekindergarten educators vary across settings. This report defines “assistant teacher” as an adult supporting the teacher who is primarily in charge of delivering instruction

support that coaching. However, the oversight provided by the onsite AOE-licensed teacher to lead teachers may meet the coaching benchmark.

PD plans *and* coaching

Family child care programs: Family child care settings are required to have an AOE- licensed teacher as a mentor for 3 hours/week. Vermont meets the standard for ongoing professional development based on child care licensing requirements

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

Table 2 shows that Vermont does not meet most benchmarks related to teacher preparation and ongoing professional development. Based on current minimum standards, no prekindergarten program setting meets the benchmark of a CDA or equivalent for assistant teachers or paraprofessionals, though many educators may meet or exceed them in practice. For the benchmarks related to lead teacher degrees and staff professional development, there is variation across settings per the minimum requirements established in Vermont’s current Universal Prekindergarten statutes and rules, though again many programs may meet or exceed them in practice.

For the benchmark that lead teachers have a BA and specialized training in prekindergarten, the variation by setting in Vermont reflects the specific history of early childhood education as a field that has primarily operated outside of public education for many decades. As publicly-funded Universal Prekindergarten was established in Vermont, there was recognition that educational pathways and credentials varied significantly across settings where an AOE-issued educator license had not been required or needed before. In addition, there was recognition that engagement from an AOE-licensed educator is an important part of Vermont’s approach to public education. Vermont’s current prekindergarten standards were an attempt to balance those realities while also ensuring widespread, or “universal,” access to prekindergarten education by including the varied settings where prekindergarten-aged children already were.

In the initial decade of Universal Prekindergarten, Vermont has implemented a number of supports and programs to assist educators in achieving increased qualifications. Supported by both AOE and CDD, these include 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 settings⁸. These programs were 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

⁸ The current program that includes sponsorship of provisional educators' licenses by AOE is currently set to expire in June 2025

roles. As a result, the state still needs significant and focused supports to meet the current standards and will need additional focus and investment for Vermont to begin to meet the national benchmark for teacher preparation..

Finally, the reason that Vermont does not meet the standard for professional development for staff is because the state does not require or resource ongoing coaching for all staff. While this coaching may be present in some cases – especially in settings where an AOE-licensed teacher is required as mentor – it is not available for many prekindergarten educators.

Recommendations for Benchmarks & Best Practices to Ensure High-Quality Prekindergarten Education

Vermont is already excelling in most areas of quality defined by NIEER, NAEYC and Head Start benchmarks. The Committee recommends that Vermont maintains these benchmarks and best practices and that we make minor improvements in these areas by:

- AOE, CDD and relevant stakeholders work together to better align local curriculum across settings, provide support for curriculum implementation, and help programs differentiate programming to better meet individual child needs. (Note: Without significant state investment in additional staff at the State, this recommendation will be difficult, if not impossible, to fulfill).
- CDD partner with AOE and relevant stakeholders to utilize learnings from the implementation of Vermont’s newly-revised 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.

The Committee also recommends moving toward putting benchmarks in the three areas where Vermont does not currently meet national standards: teacher degree, assistant teacher degree, and staff professional development. Teacher quality is a critical component of high quality prekindergarten and essential to achieving positive, sustained outcomes for young children (NIEER, 2021). However, increasing teacher requirements in the midst of nation-wide teacher shortages presents significant challenges. To be successful with this transition, Vermont must develop a comprehensive and multi-pronged approach to recruit, retain, and adequately compensate highly qualified teachers (Connors-Tadros, 2024).

Systems that have successfully increased teacher 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 successfully developed equivalent standards for community-based prekindergarten teachers by offering multiple pathways toward certification, including [giving credit for prior learning](#), providing [scholarships and financial incentives](#), using data to target recruitment, implementing [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.

Given national models for moving toward national benchmarks for teacher certification and professional development, the Committee recommends:

- Charge Agencies to develop transition plans and timelines to move toward national benchmarks for teacher credentialing and professional development.
- Gather and analyze additional information on the credentials of current prekindergarten educators in Vermont and how these credentials impact student outcomes.
- Build on models from other states that have been successful increasing prekindergarten teacher qualifications, including those referenced in this [memo from NIEER](#).
- Review and expand Vermont's existing efforts to support pathways to teacher qualifications, including the 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](#).
- Review and expand Vermont's existing coaching and mentoring efforts and models, including initiatives like Early Multi-tiered Systems of Support; quality coaching connected to STARS (called SPARQS); and Vermont Early Childhood Network as well as models of support used by school districts to support school and community-based prekindergarten.

- Align pathways to prekindergarten teacher preparation with adjustments in compensation, ensuring prekindergarten funding formulas reflects this core element in the cost of providing prekindergarten education.

Special education services for children participating in prekindergarten

This consideration was sufficiently complex that the Committee held two special subcommittee meetings in addition to discussions during Committee and Workgroup meetings. Members AOE's and CDD's special education teams were invited to discuss both the challenges and opportunities for prekindergarten special education services under Act 76. The following analysis and recommendations emerged from these conversations and also integrate feedback from stakeholder interviews with prekindergarten coordinators, Head Start leaders, and other educators.

Prekindergarten special education services fall at the intersection of multiple oversight agencies as well as federal and state law. Special education services are funded through the State Education Fund and IDEA-B federal funding, but not explicitly addressed by either prekindergarten law Act 166 or Act 76. If a young child qualifies for special education services, the funding and provision of services "follow the child," regardless of whether they are enrolled in prekindergarten and no matter what setting they attend prekindergarten programs in. By federal law, LEAs are responsible for the provision of special education services for all students in their district, regardless of whether they participate in school-based prekindergarten programs or not.

The complex intersection of laws and agencies result in regulatory and practical obstacles for delivering special education services to prekindergarten children. Although federal law requires that children receive services regardless of whether or where they are enrolled in prekindergarten, prekindergarten participation is not mandated. Therefore, families often receive special education services outside of public school settings. Parents choose where to send their children to prekindergarten, but districts decide where children will receive special education services. This complexity, combined with resource shortages in school districts, can result in families having to choose between their preferred prekindergarten location and accessing special education services.

For example, one family shared the experience of having to choose between their child attending prekindergarten in an inclusive classroom (alongside typically developing peers) in a neighboring supervisory union, and receiving special education services at their local supervisory union. Because there were no prekindergarten slots available in their SU, the child received one-on-one IEP services. When a prekindergarten slot became available in a different SU, their child's IEP could not follow them across district lines, causing the family to choose the experience of prekindergarten over other needed services. Other family stakeholders shared stories of confusion navigating the special education system and experiencing service disruptions during

transitions across programs such as Early Intervention to Essential Early Education and IDEA Part C to Part B.

For a system that is already overextended and struggling to meet demand for special education services, the potential of increased enrollment through Act 76 worried many stakeholders. Even when school districts have the best intentions and develop creative solutions, resource constraints make it very difficult to serve prekindergarten students outside of public school settings. Vermont Head Start directors reported that since the inception of UPK, LEAs have reduced or eliminated special education services within Head Start classrooms and instead inform families that in order for their child to receive their special education services, they must enroll their child in the UPK programming offered within the public school setting. 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.

As 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 theory, 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, stakeholders 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.

When considering special education services under Act 76, conversations also revealed some bright spots. From an access perspective, enrolling more four-year-olds in prekindergarten programs will likely mean more children will access special education before they enter kindergarten. Public school-based educators were particularly enthusiastic about streamlining prekindergarten special education support and oversight with more children based in public schools. Additionally, stakeholders broadly praised Vermont's prekindergarten coordinators as vital resources in connecting families with services and helping to navigate across service providers and regulations in support of young children.

On the other hand, stakeholders also expressed concern about the negative impacts of Act 76 on three-year-olds. They worried that reducing access to publicly funded prekindergarten could also reduce opportunities for detecting special education needs for this age group. For three-year-olds who are identified, they may have fewer options for placement in settings with other children their age and schools could be challenged to fund supports and services without prekindergarten funding alongside special education funding. Stakeholders also wondered about the impact of removing three-year-olds on the ability to provide inclusive classrooms where children can be

educated alongside their typically developing peers in the least restrictive environments. If the structure changes there's potential to upset the placement process that supports creating more inclusive classrooms than special education classrooms.

Recommendations for Prekindergarten Special Education Services

- Build partnerships and clarify roles and responsibilities 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 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 concerns around transitions.
- Consider formalizing the role of prekindergarten coordinators regionally so that each SU/SD has a liaison to help families and collaborate across prekindergarten settings.
- Assess common challenges across districts and identify districts where families feel well-supported and clear on their options. Build on these innovations and provide supports for districts that are struggling.
- Communicate resources and pathways more effectively to address confusion & misunderstanding of how special education services work for young children. Include guidelines on what schools provide and what resources are available through local mental health agencies and private insurance. For example, develop flow charts or guidelines to help families understand how to access services and the many agencies that can support students. (Vermont Family Network is a great resource for families.) 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.

System Level Considerations

The Committee explored four considerations focused on system level concerns: 1) the needs of State and local education agencies; 2) changes necessary to transition children who are three years of age from the 10-hour prekindergarten benefit; 3) areas of the State where prekindergarten education might be more effectively and conveniently furnished in an adjacent state; and 4) recommendations for oversight of the prekindergarten system.

The Needs of State & Local Education Agencies

Committee members conducted [interviews with multiple stakeholder groups](#) to help identify the needs of State and local education agencies. In addition to state leaders from CDD & AOE and representatives from the VTNEA, Prekindergarten Coordinators, and Superintendents; interviews

included leaders from community-based prekindergarten settings and Head Start. The needs identified across these stakeholder groups spanned equity and family choice, developmentally appropriate practice, and consistency across the system.

Leaders from CDD and AOE focused on Vermont's mixed delivery system as a necessary approach to addressing demand and meeting the varied needs of families. Community-based providers, including Head Start representatives, confirmed that a mixed delivery system is critical to allow families to make choices about their child's educational needs in alignment with their own cultural needs and preferences.

Head Start and Prek Coordinator responses focused on the need to foreground equity, access, and continuity of service for families. They value programs remaining responsive to evolving family and community needs and expressed concern about the potential for disparities in access and quality of options for children and families in underserved and very rural communities if more prekindergarten programs become school-based. They were concerned that if LEA's choose not to partner with current community-based prekindergarten providers, family access to prekindergarten may vary inequitably based on where a family lives. They also expressed concerns about how school-based prekindergarten providers, who offer 175 days/year would accommodate families with full time care needs (full-time community-based programs are often open for as many as 225 days/year or more) and aftercare.

Head Start stakeholders also shared concerns about the needs of families who currently access comprehensive services through community-based settings, including social workers, registered dietitians, registered nurses, registered dental hygienists, and licensed mental health workers. State agency leaders expressed equity concerns about how requirements for developmentally-appropriate transportation will impact district funding and family access to prekindergarten.

Interviewees across stakeholder groups emphasized the need for the prekindergarten system to prioritize the developmental needs of preschoolers. This included the necessity of play and rest as essential components of prekindergarten educational programs. They noted that consistency of setting and adult relationship is more developmentally necessary among prekindergarteners than kids in primary grades, and Head Start and community-based program leaders specified that prekindergarten in community-based settings can reduce transitions and provide consistency when children need full time care.

Stakeholders also brought attention to the value of multi-age classrooms and the importance of integrating family into children's learning. They identified a need for education leaders to be well versed in early childhood education in order to make sure that there is not a "push down" of inappropriate academics.

Interviewees across stakeholder groups highlighted the need for a consistent and coherent financial model to support any change to the prekindergarten system, including an appropriate ADM for prekindergarten children in full day programs, and appropriate tuition from LEAs to partner programs.

AOE and CDD leaders highlighted the need for administrative consistency across prekindergarten partner programs, who often work with multiple school districts and supervisory unions and therefore must negotiate different applications, contracts, attendance, training and invoicing policies. They also called for clearly defined roles for staff on AOE and CDD teams as well as for LEA staff to be laid out in response to any changes.

Many stakeholders identified a need for operational alignment across prekindergarten and K-12 State Board of Education rules related length of day, attendance and truancy policies, classroom ratios, accountability systems and safety requirements. Needs for alignment also extended to aligning transportation regulations across settings, and aligning afterschool and summer practices, policies and programs – all of which currently have different rules for prekindergarten-aged children than they do for school-aged children. The role of child care licensing regulations was raised consistently with some elements considered to be helpful and others more challenging to implementation.

Multiple stakeholder 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, stakeholders identified significant benefits to families and programs.

Recommendations to Address the Needs of State and Local Agencies

- Elevate and formalize the role of regional prekindergarten coordinators, including defining the expertise and time commitment required to benefit families, districts and the prekindergarten system.
- Retain and support mixed delivery system to support family choice and access, as well as ensure capacity to support expansion of developmentally-appropriate care
- Create systems of administrative consistency across UPK partner programs and school districts/supervisory unions to provide common applications, contracts, attendance, insurance, training and invoicing policies.
- Clearly define roles for AOE and CDD teams as well as for LEAs in response to any changes in the provision of prekindergarten education.
- Review child care licensing regulations and alignment with schools to determine if there is duplication with school standards and other ways to address the health & safety needs of prekindergarten children.

- Review State Board of Education & prekindergarten rules and create alignment re: length of day, attendance and truancy policies, classroom ratios, accountability systems, safety requirements, afterschool and transportation policies.

Changes necessary to transition children who are three years of age from the 10-hour prekindergarten benefit to child care & early education

This consideration consumed a large portion of the Committee’s conversations and revealed tensions among Committee members’ perspectives. Although some were eager to focus on implementing this change, others considered this change to be a step backwards. Ultimately, most committee members agreed that the negative consequences of removing three-year-olds from the prekindergarten benefit outweighed the benefits of expanding access to all four-year-olds. This section explores the impacts of this proposed change on children and families, as well as on prekindergarten programs.

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 percent of three-year olds (71%) enrolled in prekindergarten (NIEER, 2004). 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).

During interviews, stakeholders expressed concerns about the negative impacts that transitioning three-year-olds out of prekindergarten would have on children and families. They worried that without access to publicly funded prekindergarten fewer three-year-olds will have access to any early care and learning programs. Stakeholders also worried that families will not be able to afford group-based early learning experience even with the expanded income eligibility for Child Care Financial Assistance. 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. As noted above, stakeholders were concerned that fewer children will be identified early for service needs thus compressing their services into one year before kindergarten. Stakeholders also worried about the continuity of care for young children who will have to transition to a school-based program at age four but need after care and summer care, and may have siblings in different programs.

Stakeholders also identified negative financial consequences. Community-based prekindergarten programs worried that “losing four-year-olds to public schools” could have devastating consequences for their business model and therefore for the system more broadly. Because early education costs vary across age groups, these programs cannot simply replace income from older children by filling slots with younger children. They also worried about a loss of age diversity that

supports a healthy early learning environment. Head Start programs identified a potential strain on their program resources and infrastructure as three-year-olds transition out of prekindergarten programs and require additional funding and support to maintain program quality and effectiveness.

Stakeholders representing school-based programs also cited financial impacts to school districts of both losing the ADM funding for three-year-olds and being expected to begin operating full-day programming for four-year-olds. For most districts, this would be a large additional expense. Many school-based stakeholders, however, articulated benefits to more four-year-olds attending prekindergarten within public schools. They pointed to more centralized oversight for prekindergarten instruction, as well as increased access to school-based resources such as curriculum supports, professional development, and special education services.

Stakeholders 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. Stakeholders 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 Children Three Years of Age

- Maintain the prekindergarten benefit for both three- year-olds and four-year-olds, and take steps to increase hours, starting with four-year-olds.
- Keep opportunities for mixed-age classrooms.
- Require SUs/SD's to partner with Head Start.

Areas of the State where prekindergarten education can be more effectively conveniently furnished in an adjacent state

This consideration impacts a relatively small number of families living in towns along Vermont borders who struggle to access universal prekindergarten programs. For example, stakeholders 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, and Vermont lacks data on the births, medicaid enrollment, disability needs, and prekindergarten enrollment for these children.

Stakeholders 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.

Recommendations for Adjacent State Prekindergarten

- 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 alternative prequalification pathways for prekindergarten providers in adjacent states serving children who do not have viable options in Vermont.
 - ◆ Allow VELs requirement to be met by other state or national early learning standards
 - ◆ Allow VT licensed educator requirement to be met by another state's licensed educator
 - ◆ Allow CDD license # to equivalent for that state
 - ◆ Allow alternative program quality measure for STARS appropriate for that state
- Engage prekindergarten coordinators in impacted areas to help navigate and coordinate this alongside families and programs.

Recommendations for the oversight of the prekindergarten system

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.

Generally speaking, 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, supports 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 education, human services, Head Start, and child care on each team.

When asked what we should consider as we think about oversight of the prekindergarten system, stakeholders shared feedback focused on both challenges and benefits of the current structure of system oversight.

Committee members and stakeholders noted the challenges with consistency across the prekindergarten system that are associated with joint oversight across agencies. These inconsistencies involve duplication and administrative burden in accounting and reporting requirements. Head Start stakeholders noted the particular challenges their programs face with complying with requirements of multiple state agencies as well as federal program performance standards, fiscal accountability measures, and eligibility criteria. Protocols for fingerprinting vary across entities and, because records cannot be shared, the administrative burden of these protocols often fall 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 noted that some challenges or inconsistencies were primarily due to differences at the SD/SU-level rather than state-level factors related to joint oversight.

Committee members also noted the considerable challenges with data access and alignment given a lack of consistent protocols for data collection, disaggregation & sharing. Some needed data is not collected and other data is collected but not analyzed and shared for effective decision-making.

Prekindergarten Coordinators and HeadStart stakeholders commented that expertise for oversight is needed from both AOE and CDD. For example, stakeholders cited the unique early childhood regulations for health and safety that CDD regulations cover. There was concern expressed that K-12 settings don’t have sufficient “level of protection” to address the needs of very

young childrens (such as lower staffing ratios and requirements for extended outdoor play) and that “treating them like school-aged kids” would have negative impacts.

Some stakeholders noted that joint oversight promotes shared accountability for the prekindergarten system by each agency ensuring effective monitoring and evaluation processes that assess program effectiveness, identify areas for improvement, and address any concerns related to program implementation or outcomes. They also cited that the current prekindergarten system is under-resourced, making it necessary to rely on resources and capacity of multiple agencies to meet the needs of children, especially vulnerable children, across the state.

Recommendations for System Oversight

- Refine guiding principles and objectives for oversight of the prekindergarten system, such as promoting positive child outcomes, supporting family engagement and empowerment, and fostering collaboration and coordination among stakeholders within the early childhood education system.
- Conduct an assessment that, apart from current oversight roles, assesses what areas are best overseen by CDD or AOE, and which would be best overseen by LEAs.
- Consider specific prekindergarten regulations that are specific to public school settings. CDD regulations are often protective of best practices in serving the prekindergarten age group (ratios, play-based learning, fences and cushioning on playgrounds, extra child safety)
- Strengthen state’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.

Capacity & Funding Considerations

The Committee explored four considerations focused on capacity and funding: 1) measures to ensure capacity is available to meet demand for prekindergarten education; 2) minimum number of hours that shall constitute a full school day for prekindergarten and kindergarten; 3) necessary infrastructure changes to expand prekindergarten; and 4) the necessary infrastructure changes to expand prekindergarten.

Measures to ensure capacity is available to meet the demand for prekindergarten education

To address this consideration, the Committee reviewed data and resources currently available to understand current capacity, potential demand and potential needed capacity for prekindergarten. These included:

- [Program and student data from Teaching Strategies Gold](#), assembled by AOE
- [Analysis of Vermont's Universal PreKindergarten Program Capacity](#), conducted by Let’s

Grow Kids using data from CDD

- [Program type and offerings](#), assembled by CDD
- [Program type and enrollment data](#), collected by AOE
- [Act 76 Indicator Snapshot](#), developed by BBF inventory of data gaps and data available to monitor the impact of Act 76 implementation
- [UPK Data, Publications, Report, and Resources](#), developed by BBF list of resources and information related to universal prekindergarten.

The available data were not sufficiently robust or aligned to inform the Committee about prekindergarten demand or capacity. Therefore we initiated a [survey process](#) to gather data and make recommendations related to capacity and demand. Specific topics for the survey were brainstormed by the Committee, synthesized by AOE, and reviewed by the Committee over the summer of 2024. The PEIC Planning Team intends to finalize and approve the survey questions to send to all Vermont superintendents in September. The survey will remain open until October, when data will be analyzed and shared with the Committee. The Planning Team still needs to identify capacity to conduct this data analysis in time to include survey results in this report.

Recommendations for Addressing Capacity & Demand

- Develop recommendation these based on survey results.
- 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 process development 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.

The minimum number of hours that shall constitute a full school day for both prekindergarten & kindergarten

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. 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 Prekindergarten Hours

- Review and update statutes for mandatory attendance and length of day for K, 1 & 2
- Align statutes across prekindergarten, kindergarten and grade 1
- 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”.
- Refer to Head Start definitions of full time hours to make recommendations for prekindergarten hours.

Any necessary infrastructure changes to expand prekindergarten

This consideration was beyond the scope of the Committee to explore sufficiently.

Recommendations for Infrastructure Changes

- Additional research and analysis, TBD

Costs are associated with expanding prekindergarten, including fiscally strategic options to sustain an expansion

This consideration was beyond the scope of the Committee to explore fully. However, members reviewed existing information prekindergarten financing, including:

- [Act 76: Prekindergarten Pupil Weights Legislative Report 2023](#),
- NIEER’s [Cost of Preschool Quality & Revenue](#) (CPQ&R) tool used to develop the cost estimates for Vermont,
- CDD’s [Report to Legislature on the Cost of Care Analysis](#)

To explore prekindergarten costs further, CDD has committed resources to [commission a cost-of care analysis](#) for child care and prekindergarten. First Children’s Finance has been hired to launch this process this fall. Although this analysis won’t be available in time to integrate into this report, it will include a funding formula to help calculate the specific costs of implementing prekindergarten.

Recommendations for Costs Associated with Expanding Prekindergarten

- Update per pupil weighting to revise prekindergarten ADM to >1 by commissioning analysis used for other grades, consider options for prekindergarten offered for 10 hours, more than 10 and less than 25, and 25+ hours.

- Use 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 24/25 school year and beyond.
- Use the cost-of-care model cost-of-care analysis commissioned by CDD to model anticipated costs for prekindergarten at various hours and delivery models.

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Discussion

Question for the Committee: What overarching tensions, opportunities, open questions or conclusions do we want to highlight in the discussion? How do we both convey the multiple perspectives we hold as a Committee *and* leverage this opportunity to make recommendations that prioritize what's best for children?

Recommendations for Implementation

Question for the Committee: What overarching recommendations do we want to share here, in addition to the consideration-specific recommendations embedded above?

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Glossary

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Acknowledgements

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Appendix

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