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Subject: UPK public comments

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Janet and Heather,

I was planning to attend the UPK study committee meeting tomorrow and have had a family emergency come up, so I am unfortunately unable to attend. I reached out to LouAnn Beninato and Sherry Carlson to see if I could share my comments in writing. Thank you for providing this opportunity.

I want to start by thanking the committee for all your time and hard work. Thank you for taking a deeper dive into universal pre-K and what is developmentally appropriate for our youngest learners.

My name is Danielle Harris. I am the senior director of youth development at the Greater Burlington YMCA. Prior to this position, I was the director of early childhood programs. I continue to work closely with both our early childhood directors from our two EC sites. I have been in the field of EC for more than 25 years.

We currently have 160 children enrolled in our two locations – 106 at our downtown location and 54 at our UVMMC location. Out of those 160 kids, 74 of them are enrolled in our PreK program.

Both of our sites are high quality UPK partner programs, and we have licensed educators working at both sites.

The Y's high-quality programs nurture the potential of every child. Our programs offer a safe, nurturing environment for children to learn new skills, develop healthy and trusting relationships, and to build self-reliance through the Y values of caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility. Our high-quality early care and education experience contributes to the overall well-being of all children. Our programs offer developmentally appropriate activities in nurturing, respectful environments, while meeting the needs of families. All programs incorporate health and wellness into the curriculum to ensure children are developing healthy habits that will shape a lifetime of wellness.

We have several children in both programs who have an IEP and receive support and intervention through their school district. Our teachers collaborate with these special educators as well as participate in professional development to ensure we are providing the best possible care for all

the children in our program. This is one area that I feel centers, including ours, need additional support.

Our centers are inclusive and nondiscriminatory. We have a diverse community of learners who bring an array of learning styles, cultures, and traditions to our centers.

I wanted to share a few points that I think are important as you look at the future of universal PreK:

1. It is imperative to think about the importance of play and how much learning happens through play. Many kindergarten teachers have stated that children learn best when they are engaged and having fun. Through play, children are introduced to skills such as literacy, math, and science. Our curriculum is intentional as we incorporate these skills throughout all parts of the day.
2. It is important that we consider the number of transitions children have throughout the day. Early childhood programs provide consistency for children. The transition itself can be detrimental.
3. I think we need to define and look at the difference between “full time care” and what that means for families. If a public PreK program ends at 3:00 what does that mean for a family that needs to work until 5:00 or 5:30 and where does that child go for the last few hours? What does that transition, or transitions look like?
4. Three-year -olds are an important part of pre-K and need to be included in this discussion. In all my years of education, three-year-olds have been ready and should be included in preschool.
5. Families need choices. Availability and geographic location are factors in families’ decisions about where to enroll. When families have choices, it serves the whole family, creating less stress.
6. Supporting parents in selecting a setting and location that best meets their child’s and family’s needs, such as providing a longer program day or more flexible scheduling offered in many child care programs, or allowing older and younger siblings to attend the same site is important.
7. We need to improve access to early intervention and early childhood special education in inclusive early childhood settings to provide more seamless experiences for development and learning for children with disabilities. At the Y work closely with BSD and other school districts yet our children only receive minimal service hours and when the “school year” ends, services are eliminated, and our teachers are left to provide these services without having the background and professional training.
8. I encourage you to consider the diverse and comprehensive needs of children and their families and ensure that their needs are fully met regardless of the setting in which they receive preschool services.

I would hold the quality of our program up against other programs. We put the child first and include the family in their learning journey. As part of the team, the families too feel supported

along the way. Routine assessments ensure we are on track and the children are gaining the lifelong skills they need to be successful learners.

I encourage you to continue to discuss and learn more about the many UPK private partners who successfully provide care for so many Vermont children and families in our current mixed delivery system. Thank you again for allowing me to share my thoughts. I appreciate your time.

Danielle Harris (she, her, hers)

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