



Vermont's New Universal Pre-K Program Shows Some Growing Pains

By HOWARD WEISS-TISMAN – 04/27/17



Ava Cote, 4, reaches for a stuffed black bear early in the morning at Winston Prouty Center in Brattleboro

Two years ago, Vermont started a public pre-K program that pays for up to 10 hours of preschool for 3-to-5-year olds. Now, the state has issued [a report](#) for the Legislature that shows that there have been mixed results so far.

The report, issued by the Agency of Education and the Agency of Human Services, is a preliminary evaluation of the program, which covered 7,326

children in its first year.

While the report found that there was an increase in the number of children covered by the publicly funded pre-school under Act 166, most of the growth was centered around the Champlain Valley, and the number of low-income families did not increase with the option of free early education available.

Chloe Learey, the director of the Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development in Brattleboro, says the state's new public pre-K program is bringing some big changes.

Leary says offering 10 hours was a good start, but it's really not enough for working families.

And she worries that the increased demands for licensing, in the absence of higher wages, might force early ed centers to close at a time when she says there's an increasing demand.

"I absolutely support the concept of investing in early childhood, but I'm not sure if Act 166 gets us there," Learey says. "I feel like we're continuing the fragmentation of the system versus thinking of the, 'How can we move the whole system forward?'"



Ayaan Patel, 5, is enrolled at Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development in Brattleboro.
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And moving the system forward will take some work, according to the Act 166 legislative report that just came out.

Under the new law public schools were forced to create programs, but the law also covers private centers, like this one in Brattleboro, as well as smaller home-based programs.

Amy Fowler is a deputy secretary at the Agency of Education, and she says when the

state tried to match up the information coming in from all of those different early ed models, there were glaring inconsistencies.

"We saw so much of our data was not usable for a variety of reasons," Fowler says. "That's just not going to be acceptable as we move forward in a policy setting."

The report shows that Vermont spent about \$55 million in the first year of Act 166, and Fowler says with that kind of money on the line, the state has to have an accurate and reliable way to measure progress.

During the first year, which only covered about 30 percent of the schools in the state, 1,045 new children enrolled in the public pre-kindergarten.

Every public school district had to support an early education program in 2016.

Fowler says that's pretty good, but the number of low income families sending their children to a state-sponsored pre-K program barely budged — and she says that's a problem.

"The reason that we're concerned about that is because we are hoping that this makes it possible for more students who have free and reduced lunch to participate," she says.

Fowler expected there to be some bumps in the road as the state made such a dramatic change in how it administers its early education services. And she says they'll take all these lessons learned in the first year and try to make it better moving forward.

But for some of the people involved in early ed, there will be a period of adjustment.

Windham Child Care Association has been serving southeastern Vermont for 35 years, but in the new universal early education system, they lost a major state contract, and so they've decided to merge with Winston Prouty.



Kim Paquette reads to children as the day starts at Winston Prouty.
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"The landscape that we work in has shifted so dramatically that it's really affected our sustainability," says director Margaret Atkinson.

Atkinson says there's broad support for universal pre-k among early educators, but at the same time some apprehension about the sweeping changes.

"My hope is that what comes out the other end is something that really does work well for providers and ultimately for kids and families too," she says. "I think that people are good-heartedly working towards that end. But we're in that interim time where it's hard to know what's going to happen."

Lawmakers were looking into universal pre-K even before this report came out.

As the Legislature gets ready to wrap up for the year, a special committee might work through the summer to come back with recommended changes.

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