10 YEARS of the Vermont Community Preschool Collaborative
2005–2015

A Historical Overview with Reflections and Implications for the Future
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROJECT OVERVIEW
This overview was commissioned to review the nearly decade-long work of the Vermont Community Preschool Collaborative (VCPC), assess its successes and challenges, and provide Vermont philanthropists and stakeholders with information to aid in planning next steps and targeting of resources.

METHODOLOGY
Based on in-person telephone interviews with 16 designated stakeholders, a review of previously collected written interviews, relevant articles and documents (see end notes), the unique contributions and successes of the project emerged as well as a direction for the future.

The enactment of Act 166, passed by the Vermont Legislature in 2014, ensures sustained funding and a high level of quality for universal Pre-K as defined by state statute. Passage of Act 166 is a significant marker of VCPC’s long-term goal to achieve universal, high quality pre-kindergarten for all of Vermont’s three and four year olds. While all stakeholders acknowledge the work ahead to achieve high quality for all, passage of Act 166 is a milestone that offers an opportunity for reflection and reassessment of funding priorities and targets.

SUMMARY
Several critical factors aligned and contributed to the unique success of the Vermont Community Preschool Collaborative:

- consistent leadership at all levels
- positive political climate
- compatible initiatives at the state level
- long term commitment by funders
- pragmatic strategies
- effective technical assistance
- skillful outreach

VCPC was instrumental in creating a tipping point that made passage of Act 166 possible. While Act 166 stands as a historic achievement, universal pre-K must be seen as part of a broader, ongoing effort by philanthropists and many others to ensure that all young children in Vermont have access to high quality early learning and development opportunities. Much work remains.

This document summarizes VCPC’s history, presents the unique qualities that enabled its success as well as the challenges encountered, and offers reflections and implications for the future.
Introduction

A seed for the Vermont Community Preschool Collaborative (VCPC) was planted several years before its 2005 startup when Permanent Fund President, Rick Davis, met Mark Sustic, an early educator working in Franklin County. Sustic was part of an effort initiated by a group of public school, child care, state government, legislative and health care leaders to ensure that all children had access to high quality early learning and development opportunities. Realizing the potential to replicate this model around the state, the Permanent Fund began to garner support for its long-term goal to achieve universal access to high quality pre-kindergarten for all of Vermont’s 3- and 4-year-olds.

Ten years later, the Vermont Legislature enacted Act 166, providing a sustainable source of funding for universal Pre-K. Arriving at this milestone required great effort on the parts of many stakeholders. None were more determined in pursuing their vision than the collection of partners who made the Vermont Community Preschool Collaborative happen and kept it going for a decade.

When VCPC launched in 2005, the total enrollment in Vermont for pre-kindergarten and pre-k special education was 2,500 children. By targeting grants and technical assistance for shared pre-k services to local school districts and community child care providers, the VCPC directly helped to increase publicly funded preschool enrollment by over 1800 children. By the close of the 2013 school year, 5,700 children were enrolled in high quality pre-k programs around the state.

Vermont children enrolled in pre-kindergarten

in 2005: 2,500

in 2014: 5,700

How this came about, the historical context, the influence and role the Vermont Community Preschool Collaborative played to help build a universal pre-k system in Vermont that offers equal access to high quality programs throughout the state, lessons learned and recommendations for next steps are the focus of this report.
Background & History

When the Vermont Community Preschool Collaborative (VCPC) was launched in 2005, key state partners and a strong grassroots foundation were in place across the state, ready to support a more unified roll out of prekindergarten programs across the state.

Early Childhood Regional Councils, Success By Six initiatives, the Parent Child Center Network, Head Start and the State Team for Children and Families, among others, all contributed to make sure that families with young children received the supports needed to arrive at the Kindergarten door healthy, ready to learn and succeed in public school. Many early childhood and family support services were in place to help make this happen.

The collective vision to ensure universal, high quality Pre-K for all three and four year olds in Vermont would require linking the child care system with the public education system. To do this meant altering historic divisions and attitudes between the two and forging new relationships built on mutual interest and respect.

Prior to 2005, Rick Davis, the Permanent Fund’s President, met Mark Sustic, an early educator working in Franklin County. As chair of the regional early childhood advisory council, Sustic was part of a community effort shared by a group of public school, child care, state government, legislative and health care leaders to ensure that all children had access to high quality early learning and development opportunities. Public schools were able to capitalize on an early 1990’s change in the school funding formula that allowed schools to count pre-k children in their school census. With that as an incentive, a community proposal process resulted in an effort to ensure universal, high quality pre-k as a primary goal of the advisory council.

Bringing together the various stakeholders and helping to guide different points of view toward a cohesive, shared vision for young children and their families launched a successful community pre-k model. The St. Albans pre-k initiative caught the attention of others around Vermont, and the Permanent Fund asked Sustic to lead a similar community process in Winooski. This second initiative gave the Permanent Fund the evidence it needed to convince other Vermont philanthropists, who were already targeting their investments in Vermont to early learning, to work with them on universal pre-k for all Vermont three and four year olds. One of the vehicles to build the public/private partnerships that were needed in school districts was the Vermont Community Preschool Collaborative.

Although the school funding formula allowed school districts to count pre-k children in their census, a serious deterrent remained: schools had to average their numbers for two years before receiving any public education dollars. This meant there were no incentives or resources to start up programs. The funders, who were committed to promoting quality care for all pre-school children from birth to school age, saw an opportunity here. If VCPC provided bridge funding for those initial two years, school districts would be able to start up quality programs without asking for budget increases. After two years, a sustainable funding source kicked in. It made sense to the individual philanthropists to pool their resources, magnify their investments and achieve a greater impact. Working to create access to universal pre-k for all three and four years olds in Vermont would advance a major portion of their overall birth to school age vision by influencing a huge slice of the early childhood pie.

The timing was right. Philanthropic partners were ready to work together, consultants were available to work to make it happen, and education and policy leaders were actively in support. Regional early childhood councils were already established and provided a forum to bring school personnel and community child care providers to the table to explore local collaborations.
Major Milestones

Sustained Work & Progress

Vermont has a long history of supporting early learning that goes back at least to the 1980s when interest and commitment to early childhood education gained momentum and champions. Head Start, public schools, child care and various social service organizations have long been providing experiences and environments designed to stimulate early learning and socialization for young children and their families. At that time, many public preschools were primarily designed to serve children with disabilities, thanks to the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, giving all children with disabilities, including preschoolers, the right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.

As more and more parents, especially women, joined the workforce, child care programs began to expand to meet the needs of working families. Greater attention to quality began to emerge as more and more children spent the majority of their waking hours in out-of-home care. Families looking for high quality full time care were often hard pressed to find it.

Combining school-based “early education” programs with private child care offered a possible solution to the need for both quality and fulltime care. By the late 1980’s and early 90’s, collaborative early care programs among public schools, Head Starts and private child cares were forming in many school districts.

A summary of developments, including legislative actions, that laid the foundation and paved the way for universal Pre-k in Vermont can be found in Appendix A: Milestones that Paved the Way for Universal Pre-K in Vermont.
Benefits & Challenges

To gather diverse points of view and a comprehensive scope of the effectiveness of VCPC, numerous reports and articles were reviewed and 16 telephone interviews were conducted with principal stakeholders (See Appendix B: In-Person Interview List). These yielded an in depth history and understanding of how VCPC began, how it operated, what factors contributed to its success, lessons learned and the impact in communities across the state. Responses and perspectives shared were sorted into four stakeholder groups:

- Community partners
- Funders
- Consultants/Staff
- Policy makers

While each group held views based on their unique involvement with VCPC, common themes emerged that crossed all four categories. For example, community partners highlighted the in-person consultant contact that provided ongoing support, mentoring, and problem solving. Funders noted VCPC’s “...combination of strategy, advocacy and direct services,” as keys to the project’s success.

Interview questions from each group can be found in Appendix C: Interview Questions. A brief summary of responses follows.

BENEFITS

Community partners included both school personnel and child care providers. Everyone receiving VCPC support agreed that the in-person consultant contact in the form of ongoing support, mentoring, coaching, availability to answer questions, problem solving, and helping to break down the barriers between school and child care cultures was most important.

The benefit of participating in professional development offered by the school partnership, including professional staff who came into the classrooms to help with special needs children, was also highlighted.

Funders noted VCPC’s consistent leadership, the commitment to long term work, measurable results and return on investment, meaning “every grant resulted in permanent pre-k slots,” efficient use of funds, gaining the experience of a successful working collaboration, and kudos to the VCPC staff as “people who know how to get things done.”

Consultants noted the funders’ commitment as well as having a clear staring point and finish line, (“Act 166 is the return on investment”), and building respect and recognition for the private child care sector.

Policy makers recognized VCPC’s financial support for an underfunded pre-k system, noted the staff as the project’s greatest assets and the funders as “unwavering in their mission because of their steadfast resolve to get the job done.”

Respondents were unanimous in their high praise for the two consultants as VCPC’s greatest assets.
CHALLENGES

A few of the challenges experienced by respondents follow:

Community partners noted the very real challenges involved with two different cultures learning about each other, gaining respect for each other and working together. Here, the professional and personal skills of the consultants were critical in facilitating different views in order to forge effective working relationships and agreements.

Community partners also acknowledged the lack of consistency for providers (some may work with three or four different school districts), in terms of tuition payments and different billing processes dependent on the individual school district. Some found the ever increasing number of early childhood initiatives to be complex, confusing and counter productive to designing a simpler system based on desired outcomes for young children and their families.

Funders touched upon their desire to take VCPC from a 10 hrs/week concept to something looking more like their vision of a high quality birth to school age system for all children. Concern was also expressed about how a single minded focus on pre-k could lead to a situation where “as more kids enroll in public settings, infant/toddler care is pushed out and becomes more expensive. It (the pre-k system) takes the well compensated kids and moves them into public settings and leaves the private providers with just infants and toddlers.” Communication and clarity of roles for funders was also touched on as important.

Consultants focused on managing a changing and expanding territory over the duration of the project, presenting the inherent difficulties of being spread thin while staying responsive to community’s needs and focused on VCPC’s core mission. Real and perceived differences in educational values and philosophies between public schools and the private child care sector were common areas needing navigation and leadership to craft shared understandings so that agreements could be reached. School leaders were sometimes poorly informed about pre-k funding and, as a result, missed seeing the opportunities. The difficulty establishing trust between schools and child care partners, as well as between schools and the Agency of Education was also noted.

Consultants also mentioned a desire for more support in the public relations arena as well as an added capacity to network and share successes among community partners. Awareness about the broad scope of the birth to school age system, not just the 10 hours/week of pre-k, was sometimes difficult to convey.

Policy makers cited issues with delays in startup funding and schools’ reluctance to manage a new program. A lack of awareness about pre-k quality, including teacher qualifications, and inequitable access to resources in school systems were also mentioned as challenges.
What’s Next?

Implications for VCPC’s Future

Each category of respondent and each individual within that category have their own ideas about where VCPC should focus next. All agree that VCPC has an important role to play as Vermont’s new universal Pre-K law, Act 166, is implemented. Common themes by stakeholder category are:

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Community Partners are most concerned about building capacity to meet the need and demand to qualify for Act 166, as 10 hours/week of pre-k is required in all school districts by July 1, 2016. They point to the insufficient availability of licensed teachers currently and wonder how Vermont will meet this requirement.

Community Partners see a major role for VCPC and the combined expertise and experience of the consultants to help schools, providers and parents understand Act 166; the funding, opportunities and requirements. Helping to ensure equity across districts and support for schools that are just starting pre-k programs, helping to guide a thoughtful implementation process and technical assistance strategies to establish ongoing professional development were all emphasized. Respondents agreed that the value of consultants with expertise in pre-k implementation who have credibility and respect in all sectors of the early childhood field are key to successful roll out of the legislation. All point to a continuation of VCPC in the new universal pre-k environment.

FUNDERS

Funders were in step with community partners in their focus on building quality and capacity. They acknowledged the need to provide technical assistance to school districts to improve quality and provider capacity. Improving quality remains an issue for existing programs as well as new ones.

Funders emphasized the value of using the foundation already built with VCPC to expand their focus to the earlier years. An important consideration voiced was to think more broadly about a birth to five system, integrating VCPC with other initiatives, e.g. VB3, and expanding the private sector and health care system involvement.

With universal pre-k established in statute, new areas of critical work become prominent. Now that a baseline quality standard for universal pre-k has been established, it is time to think about how VCPC can use its experience, its networks and its expertise to work on a broader vision by improving quality and expanding to other age groups. Merging with Vermont Birth to Three holds potential.

Funders agreed that, while successful Act 166 implementation is critical, there is also an opportunity to design a new funding collaboration grounded in the successful experience with VCPC. All the funding partners expressed an interest in continuing their collaborative work.

CONSULTANTS

Consultants were clear about the need to increase both program quality and capacity as well as expand the work of VCPC to meet a broader vision of the future early childhood system inclusive of, but not limited to, pre-k. To
achieve a quality and consistently equitable pre-k system under Act 166, technical assistance will need to be integrated with capacity building. Consultants believe that VCPC has a role to play to ensure that effective technical assistance strategies are embedded in the Act 166 implementation.

**POLICY MAKERS**

From their point of view, policy makers believe that a focus on advancing quality and professional development to grow a strong, qualified workforce is paramount. A targeted technical assistance effort from VCPC could help achieve this. Continuing to use VCPC’s consultant expertise and experience is key to any effort VCPC decides to take on.
Five Key Recommendations

1. SUSTAIN THE EFFORT
Consider a role for VCPC that expands the pre-k work into a birth to five vision integrating current public/private initiatives, e.g. VB3.

2. ECONOMIZE INVESTMENTS
Integrate, link and maximize existing initiatives. Link philanthropic investments with state and federal initiatives.

3. BUILD ON SUCCESS
Use the VCPC approach and strategies to ensure that implementation of Act 166 is thoughtful, effective and equitable statewide.

4. APPLY THE LESSONS
Be mindful of VCPC’s lessons learned and successes when planning next steps.

5. STAY FOCUSED
Set targeted, measurable goals.
Endnotes

RESOURCE MATERIALS & REFERENCES


Vermont Community Preschool Collaborative interviews with Susan Bruhl (Special Education Coordinator, Addison Northeast Supervisory Union), Karen Burnell, (Director of Early Childhood Education, Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union), and Sandra Cameron (Early Childhood Coordinator, Barre Town and Barre City schools), October 2014.

Vermont Community Preschool Collaborative interview with Tracy Wrend, Superintendent, Lamoille South Supervisory Union, July 2013.


Vermont Community Preschool Collaborative. *In Their Own Words: Stories from the Pre-K Field.* Vermont Community Preschool Collaborative, January 2014.
Appendix A

MILESTONES THAT PAVED THE WAY FOR UNIVERSAL PRE-K IN VERMONT

• Authorization in 1987 under Title 16 V.S.A. § 563 (6) that school board powers include “discretion to administer early educational programs.” (S.82, 1987)

• Adoption of legislation in 1987 creating the Vermont Early Education Initiative that provided competitive grants to communities targeting “at risk preschoolers.” Planned as a statewide Department of Education initiative over a five-year period, adequate funding levels were not realized to achieve this goal.

• The Early Childhood Work Group convened in 1992 to help create a “unified system for child development services which shares common standards for quality...” Among its accomplishments, establishing a set of core definitions and standards for all center-based early childhood programs in Vermont (1994). After gathering feedback at conferences and public forums, The Vermont Core Standards and Self-Assessment Tool for Center-Based Early Childhood Programs were published in 1996 and played an instrumental role in unifying programming since then.

• 1999, Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Education Commissioner Marc Hull and Agency of Human Services Commissioner William Young to clarify the relationship between the Department of Education and the Child Care Services Division of the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services as it relates to authority of early education programs. It was agreed that all early childhood programs serving children from birth to kindergarten, regardless if they are located within public schools or private centers, meet the same state licensing requirements.

• Passage of Acts 60 (1997) and 68 (2003) addressing inequities in Vermont’s public education system in terms of educational opportunities and financing. Early education was addressed through these acts, including the permitting of state education funds to be used for prekindergarten education.

• Children and Youth Cabinet established by Governor Howard Dean in February, 2002. The Early Childhood Subcommittee of the Cabinet was charged to bring recommendations to the Legislature in January, 2003.

• Recognizing the need for a more formal system to coordinate the plethora of early childhood programs and services, Vermont applied for and received a grant from the North Carolina Smart Start Technical Assistance Center in 2002 to further this effort. A set of recommendations emerged from this work that led to the establishment of Building Bright Futures as a public-private partnership.

• Building Bright Futures Transitional Board established as a public/private partnership by Governor Douglas’s Executive Order, August, 2004.

• Legislation introduced, 2005, (S.89 and H. 231) to “…create building bright futures: the Vermont alliance for children, a public-private partnership of state government decision-makers, parents, and private sector leaders.”

• Proposals during the 2003-04 and 2005-06 legislative sessions (S.166 and S.314 respectively) to clarify expectations as communities explored collaborative early education opportunities. This dialogue resulted in Act 186 and appointment of a legislative study committee.

• Identification of early education by the Vermont State Board of Education as an area to be considered in its 2006 Strategic Plan and establishment of an ad hoc committee on early education.
• Act 186 (2006) established a pre-kindergarten legislative study committee (the Prekindergarten Education Study Committee) to gather information on current status of pre-k programs in Vermont, services offered, cost and revenue sources, standards governing programs and research on benefits of pre-kindergarten and whether public funds should be used to support pre-k programs.

• June, 2006, Governor Douglas issues Executive Order establishing the Building Bright Futures Advisory Council.

• Prekindergarten Education Study Committee presents its findings, February, 2007, to house and senate committees on education, human services and health and welfare.

• Vermont’s initial pre-k legislation, Act 62, is signed into law in 2007, providing state and local support for publicly funded prekindergarten education for 3-5 year old children. It also allows interested communities to provide limited prekindergarten education services in quality settings.

• The Building Bright Futures Executive Order in place until June 30, 2010. Act 104 establishes Building Bright Futures in Vermont statute, protecting it from changing political climates.

• In July 2011, Building Bright Futures becomes a nonprofit organization serving the dual role of the State Early Childhood Advisory Council and the governance structure for the early childhood system, aligning the work at the State level with the work of 12 regional councils across Vermont.

• In 2014, the legislature passes Act 166 which provides universal publicly funded prekindergarten education for a minimum of ten hours per week for 35 weeks annually for all 3, 4 and 5-year-old children who are not enrolled in kindergarten.

• Originally intended to go into effect on July 1, 2015, on November 25, 2014, Secretary Holcombe of the Agency of Education (AOE) and Interim Secretary Chen of the Agency of Human Services (AHS) issue a Transition Relief Bulletin which allows school districts to delay the implementation of universal prekindergarten education until July 1, 2016. The purpose of the delay is to allow sufficient time for the adoption of administrative rules to guide implementation.

• While most of the state’s 270-plus districts already have programs for pre-K students, 37 do not. It is estimated the universal pre-K bill will bring about 1,800 additional 3, 4 and 5 year-olds into preschool programs. The total number of children who would take advantage of the program is expected to be about 6,000, or 60 percent of the state’s 11,284 preschool-aged children. (Vermont Digger, May 6, 2014)
Appendix B

IN-PERSON INTERVIEW LIST & DATE INTERVIEWED

Community partners

- Susan Bruhl, Special Education Co-Coordinator, Addison Northeast Supervisory Union, 12.11.14
- Tracy Patnoe, Child Care Partner, Mud City Kids, Morrisville, 11.03.14
- Deb Reed, Child Care Partner, Orchard Valley Waldorf School Administrator, Montpelier, 12.03.14
- Brenda Schramm, Child Care Partner, Starting Points Network Leader, Bennington, 10.30.14
- Tracy Wrend, Lamoille South Supervisory Union Superintendent, 11.04.14

Funders

- Rick Davis, President, The Permanent Fund, 10.28.14
- Curt Fields, President & CEO, The Turrell Fund, 10.23.14
- Eddie Gale, Program Director, The A.D. Henderson Foundation, 10.20.14
- Stuart Comstock Gay, President and CEO, The Vermont Community Foundation, 11.12.14
- Fagan Hart, Co-Executive Director, Vermont Children’s Trust Foundation, 11.05.14
- Linda Allen, Co-Executive Director, Vermont Children’s Trust Foundation, 11.05.14
- Lucy Henderson, Board of Trustees, The A.D. Henderson Foundation, 10.22.14

Policy makers

- Jeff Francis, Executive Director, The Vermont Superintendent's Association, 11.04.14
- Jim Squires, Senior Research Fellow, National Institute for Early Education Research, 10.28.14

Consultants

- Sherry Carlson, VCPC Project Consultant, The Permanent Fund, 10.17.14
- Kim Keiser, Vermont Project Director, The Turrell Fund, 10.14.14
- Mark Sustic, VCPC Project Consultant, The Permanent Fund, 10.08.14
Appendix C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview content covered was similar for all interviewed, although specific questions were asked to gain the unique perspective of funders, community partners, consultants and policy makers.

Sample interview questions/topics included:

- How and why was VCPC started?
- What were the critical needs that precipitated launching VCPC?
- Who were the key supporters and what do you think motivated them?
- What were VCPC’s greatest assets and challenges?
- What, if anything, would you do differently?
- Has VCPC accomplished its mission?
- Do you think VCPC still has a role to play and, if so, what is that?

Additional questions for community partners

- How did VCPC influence pre-k in your community?
- Was that a worthwhile investment of your time?
- How did VCPC influence your work?

Additional questions for funders

- How did you become involved in the work of VCPC?
- What kept you involved?
- Do you feel it has been a worthwhile investment? Why or why not?
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