

Good morning. My name is Alex Yin. I am a school board member of the Winooski School District. I have been very fortunate to have joined the Coalition for Vermont Student Equity – a coalition of school board members from all over Vermont who recognize the need to change the current pupil weighting formula to ensure equity for all.

Even though I am a school board member, I think it will be useful to understand my background so that you can have better understanding of where my comments come from regarding the weights around English Language Learners (ELL). My educational background is in Electrical Engineering, (where I hold a bachelors' and masters' degree from Georgia Tech), Statistics (master's degree from Penn State), and a doctorate in higher education (Penn State). I have also worked in higher education for the past 16 years, where I have devoted a great amount of time trying to make it more affordable and accessible through the usage of qualitative and quantitative data. Thus, I am coming to you not just sharing with you my experiences as a school board member but with a bit of expertise regarding building sustainable, efficient, education systems.

Here is quick overview of the numbers for Winooski School District. Since FY 2009, we have seen our:

- ELL population increase 75% (from 181 to 320 students)
- ELL budget increase 250% (from \$359,753 to \$1,262,712)

I recognize the numbers may not seem equivalent, but this is why context matters. When you only look at numbers, you won't realize the context such as the number of different cultures or when our ELL students enter the school district. I know my colleagues from Winooski School District went into more specific details as to what goes into the ELL budget earlier today. What they described is the monies needed to support a student in developing their language skills. Yet, I want to remind the task force that students are not in our district in isolation. What we have to remember is that there are other needs beyond learning English for our ELL students.

These include:

- **Keeping parents of ELL students informed:** US school systems are designed to be under local control. This means our school board needs to do more to ensure we keep our families informed of their students' education. Since ELL funds are rightfully devoted to the students, these initiatives/events are often neglected because of resource constraints. We have been strategic in our efforts to keep parents of ELL community informed, such as having interpreters at our budget process meetings as well as hot topics; however we can do better. As a school district we want this to happen, because involved parents generally mean better outcomes for our district. This is also beneficial to our community, as these New Americans learn about US democracy in action and it helps them better integrate into Winooski. By engaging our community, we also build in the accountability to properly manage our resources.
- **Helping families of ELL students navigating bureaucracies of day to day life:** Often times our ELL students are "connectors" for their families as they navigate life in the United States. From managing housing paperwork (e.g., rent or mortgage applications) to residency documentation (e.g., US Citizenship papers), our students help their parents do things that many of us didn't worry about until adulthood. Often times, our cultural liaisons are pulled into these matters (I know because I was helping out a Chinese Family in Winooski), which is why they are often overwhelmed and overworked. Some might argue this is outside the realm of a public school, but I say otherwise. If these are things that prevent a student from attending or excelling a

school, why not invest now – because the dividends will pay off in the long run (see Pablo Bose research: <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9789811563850>).

- **Recognizing that the majority of our ELL are also first generation students:** Not that earning a degree in higher education needs to be the end goal for everyone; however, this should be an informed choice by the individual. Navigating the college process is not easy especially when finances are part of the equation. Even though we take great pride in our US Higher Education System, it is like no other. Whereas our system is about access; other countries are about educating who is deemed capable via a tracking system (e.g., Germany, China). Here we have choices between trade schools, community colleges, liberal art colleges, public regional universities, private universities, and research universities – other countries determine a path by an exam starting in high school. Having mentored a few Winooski high school students, I realize how important support services are to our ELL students (I have been fortunate to have been thanked in this past year for students getting into Middlebury College and Washington University). We shouldn't be relying on the good-will of community members to provide this type of counseling. Due to the inequities of the current pupil weighting formula – this is what occurs. This impacts our community even more – because our students come from families that do not understand the college-going process.

Under the current system, because the current weights are inadequate, we see families in our district leave because our non-ELL parents perceive that we invest more in our ELL students. In my first year on the school board, I did focus groups with parents and I heard comments such as “diversity is great as my child is expose to multiple cultures and hear different languages, but my student is not being challenged.” The White flight is evident when you watch our elementary and middle school winter concert performances when each class is asked to sing a song. By stigmatizing our district with categorical aid, which often comes with administrative barriers and restrictions, you make it even harder for us school boards members to highlight the assets in our community. Assets that not only strengthen and build our community, but also make a better environment for all students to learn.

One of the greater movements in education is the notion of Universal Design. A philosophy at its core knows that if we account for all the characteristics of our student population; everybody benefits. I have been impressed with our efforts to adhere to this philosophy in the design of the curriculum and program (e.g., Multi-tiered system of support). If you think about it, the antithesis is categorical aid, which is designed to focus on a certain aspect of a student as opposed to educating the whole student. I have seen this play out with our usage of federal funds for special education. In Winooski, we have a bus in our district that can only be used for special education students. We are not allowed to use it for any other reason because of the restrictions of the grant/aid, even though we have a desperate need for transportation in our district. Universal design allows us to be more efficient and effective, because the concept is to design initiative/program/curriculum with all students in mind at first and then tailor programs to those who need more assistance. The concept of categorical aid is to design for a specific need at first, without considering the whole student population.

In theory, the concept of categorical aid seems appealing because who doesn't want more resources to address a specific issue. The great baseball philosopher Yogi Berra once said, “In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is.” As someone who has devoted his professional career to using both quantitative and qualitative data to education, I know learning doesn't happen in a vacuum. There is much more fluidity in our system, which suggest a big picture approach in

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properly adjusting the weights would allow school districts to more effectively and efficiently utilize their funds for optimal outcomes. It is then that we will truly achieve equity.

Thank you for your time and I am open to questions.

Alexander C. Yin, Ph.D.
Winooski School Board Trustee
Coalition for Vermont Student Equity, Inc.