

Good afternoon. My name is Marc Schaubert. I'm the Executive Director of The Coalition for Vermont Student Equity. We are a non-profit that was formed by a group of Vermont school board directors out of frustration with the lack of progress on the implementation of the recommendations from the Pupil Weighting Factors Report.

We currently have 22 member districts from disparate parts of Vermont. Our members range from small and rural, like Marlboro in the south and Troy in the North, to large and urban school districts like Burlington and Winooski in the west and Windham Southeast in the east. While most of our member districts are currently underweight, we do have some, such as my own home town of Dover, the Washington Central School District and our newest member, Peacham School District, that are overweight. They have joined us because they understand that equity ultimately benefits everyone.

For more than two decades now, many people suspected the weights being used to determine each district's portion of the education fund were incorrect. The Pupil Weighting Factors Report delivered to the Legislature at the end of 2019 confirmed this.

Districts are not asking for some arbitrary bail out. We are asking you, the legislature, to follow the science and data from the study that you yourself commissioned and the taxpayers spent \$300,000 to have done by some of the best education funding researchers in the country.

We recognize that there are districts that have had extra taxing capacity thanks to the flawed formula and that they will be asked to give that up for the sake of equity. This extra taxing capacity has given these districts the ability to keep their tax rates lower in comparison to many overweight districts. They have also had the benefit of more than two decades of extra low cost money to build up their infrastructure, programming, staff and reserves.

The majority, 65%, of Vermont's school districts are underweight and have suffered under a lack of taxing capacity. They've had to make difficult decisions for the last 20+ years. We aren't asking for anything above and beyond what Dr. Kolbe's study has identified as our fair share of the education funds. Equity should be a shared goal for all Vermonters. But as Ruth Bader Ginsburg once said, "to those accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression." And because of this, we understand that some wealthier districts will feel as though they are being asked to make sacrifices. I'm not going to sugar coat it. If the weights are finally corrected to reflect the actual costs of educating different types of learners, wealthier, mostly white, districts will have to work differently. This won't be a guaranteed tax increase for any district though. That is within each district's control. They can choose to reduce some programming, develop creative ways to do more with less, they can raise their property taxes or some combination thereof. But you can rest assured that by correcting the weights, you are finally creating a level playing field for everyone.

We understand that these changes won't be easy for some. So our coalition is willing to compromise by accepting a phased-in approach, similar to H.54, and the use of federal dollars to mitigate impacts to districts that have grown accustomed to the extra taxing capacity for so long now.

We understand that the task force is considering the use of categorical aid, especially for ELL funding, which we understand means ELL students would be removed from the weighting formula. We strongly oppose the use of categorical aid for this purpose and for the other categories of learners, including rural, small schools and low-income students. You've heard from many people this summer why this type of grant system doesn't work. At the risk of boring you, I believe I'd be remiss if I didn't share our position on some of those reasons.

At a high level, categorical aid grants do not achieve equity. Inherently, they increase overall statewide education spending while directing the additional funds to specific districts not based on equitable distribution, but based on political determination. Categorical aid dollars are not directly voted on by the taxpayers, yet would be a tax increase for all Vermonters, including those in districts that need these resources the most and can least afford them.

Categorical aid, as we've seen with the small schools grants, adds administrative costs and burden, especially to those districts that run the leanest business offices due to insufficient resources. Districts cannot count on these grants or at best, cannot count on the amount of the grant year over year. Perhaps the current legislature and appropriations committees will create a good product that helps districts. But there is no way to guarantee that the next legislature and appropriations committees will maintain the grant amounts, their purpose or the criteria for qualifying for them. This makes planning, including the hiring of staff, extremely difficult. Hiring in the world of education is quite difficult to begin with... but who would want to take a job that may or may not be funded in the future? Or worse, districts are forced to raise their taxes to cover for insufficient grants or loss of these grants altogether.

If you are still seriously considering the use of categorical grants for any of these categories of learners, here are a few questions from the Coalition that I hope you'll consider before making any decisions.

- What analysis has the legislature done to determine what amount of categorical aid would be necessary to provide districts with equitable educational opportunities? The UVM Study has an empirical basis for setting the weights. What empirical basis would you use to determine how to establish categorical aid amounts?
- If categorical aid is used for ELL, as an example, how would it be calculated, if not on the basis of ELL population? And in that case, why not simply correct the weights as recommended in the report?



You are all here doing very important and necessary work under some very tough circumstances, for that the Coalition thanks you. There is no dispute that our current pupil weighting formula is not equitable. You have in front of you an extremely comprehensive, mathematically and scientifically sound, domestically and internationally peer reviewed, and award winning research report. There have been no justifiable criticisms of the researchers or the study to give any doubt to its validity. In 2018 the legislature asked the right questions, namely is our system equitable and if not, how do we make it so. We now have the answers.

Over the course of the pandemic, Vermont has led the nation in almost all categories by listening to and respecting science and math, and acting accordingly. All we are asking you to do is follow the same principle for the pupil weighting formula. In the divided world we live in, there is no way to make everyone happy. But moving forward, you have an opportunity to make everyone whole.

I'll end by reminding all of us that ultimately this is about the children. The current inequities in the system have resulted in entire generations of Vermont children being on the short end of the stick. The Coalition and school boards across the state are made up of volunteers who don't get a paycheck for our work but are fighting tooth and nail for the current generation of children in our school system and for those generations to come.

We urge you to simplify your efforts and stay focused on what you have right in front of you, which are recommendations based on empirical evidence. Failure to create a plan to implement Dr. Kolbe's recommendations will allow harm to be experienced by impoverished, rural, small and multicultural districts, knowingly. Something I know not one of us wants to see.