

Good Afternoon, committee members. Thanks for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Chris Tormey, and I'm a member of the Cabot School Board. Cabot is a small preK-12 school with 160 students located about 20 miles northeast of here along the headwaters of the Winooski River.

A major conclusion of the "Pupil Weighting Factors Report" is that Vermont's current formula for determining a school's "equalized pupils" figure doesn't adequately account for the large differences in resources and funding needed to support the education of students who arrive at school from different backgrounds with different strengths and often vastly different needs.

As a board member from a small school with a wide variety of students, I wholeheartedly agree with that conclusion.

Possibly because of our small class sizes in Cabot, we've built a strong reputation for our ability to help students with learning challenges succeed- and as a result we often have families move to Cabot so their children can access our program. At the end of last year, 23% of our students were receiving Special Ed services. But the challenge of that success is that we have much higher special education costs, and over the past several years those costs have meant that we have had to reduce other programs in order to keep our budgets to a level that our town's voters will approve.

Over the past decade the average household income in Cabot has dropped, and currently 54% of our students qualify for free and reduced meals. At the same time, we are seeing more and more of our elementary students arriving at school with significant trauma as a result of a range of "adverse childhood experiences". I'm very proud of the fact that our town's voters approved the hiring of an additional school counselor for the elementary grades to help support those students, but the reality is that the resources needed to support our kids are going up at the same time that our town's financial capacity to provide those resources is decreasing.

In two of the past three years our voters have rejected proposed school budgets on Town Meeting Day because the budgets exceeded the "Excess Spending" threshold and as a result triggered a penalty: an addition to the Homestead tax rate. On both occasions, cuts to other parts of our school's program were needed to get the budget below the penalty threshold. This spring, our board was on the verge of eliminating our high school's world language teacher prior to the Legislature's decision to pause the Excess spending penalty for two years.

I urge the Legislature to adopt the recommendations of the study committee that would increase the pupil weighting for factors like poverty that have a huge impact on the cost of educating students. In our case in Cabot, adopting those recommendations would, according to the study, reduce the Homestead tax rate by over twenty cents. Doing that would have several positive effects: it would reduce the cost borne by Cabot taxpayers to support our school, it would allow us to continue to meet the needs of all of our students without the regular challenge of cutting

some programs in order to sustain others required by law, and it might potentially allow us to add to our school's programs in ways that can benefit all of our students.

Thanks for convening this hearing tonight, and for your work on this critical issue.