

Memo

To: Task Force on the Implementation of the Pupil Weighting Factors

From: George Cross

Date: September 8, 2021

(This memo is a rewrite of a previous one sent to Laura Sibilia and Kathleen Sims after reading their article in the Vermont Digger.)

I have read the *Study of Pupil Weights in Vermont's Education Funding Formula* and find the following:

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to compare education funding across this country. A few states basically fund education with taxes and fees on what comes out of the ground. Others are geographically positioned so as to capitalize on water fronts (oceans, rivers and lakes), mountains or just plain sunshine in one way or another. Still others employ taxes; sales, real estate, income, or other in various configurations as the bases for school funding. Average wages and real estate values also vary across states as do political views and the perceived value of public education.

I have worked in three states, Vermont, Massachusetts and New Hampshire, both in "wealthy" and "poor" communities. While all profess to be pro education, each has a different definition as to what that means. This is true at both the state and community levels. My work includes serving as a teacher, school principal, director of elementary education, superintendent of schools in both multi-district and single district configurations and as an adjunct

professor of education at a state college. I have also served in the Vermont House of Representatives for 10 years, including 8 on the House Education Committee.

First, all parties must accept a few facts: School districts are simply not created equally. Even schools within a district may not be created equally. Most importantly, students are also not created equally. Thus, it is imperative that the state finds a way to equalize educational opportunity for all students regardless of zip code or socio-economic strata. These facts makes any truly fair education funding mechanism difficult to create and to manage.

Having said all of that, let me say that I think the writers of the report got most of it correct. For instance, there is an added per pupil cost associated with the operation of small schools. However, in some cases small schools are absolutely essential. The suggested weights from the study under the column *New Weight Derived from Models With Controls for SWDs* make sense to me with a few possible exceptions:

- The poverty ratio is a hard sell. It costs more to educate children in poverty there is no question about that, but how many times the current ratio of .25 is difficult to determine. Assuredly, it is several times the current weight.
- ELL is also an added cost. ELL students should not be a part of special education unless they have special education needs beyond English language development. School districts with low ELL pupil counts are sometimes disadvantaged in this area due to the fact that the ELL population has very divergent needs. A ratio

for this group certainly belongs in the weighting system. The current weight of .20 was more speculation than careful research when it was inserted in the original Act 60 legislation.

- Pre-kindergarten is an essential program; especially in poorer communities, for students from low-income families or in geographic areas where there are few affordable options for such services. Again, a weight for these students is needed in the basic funding mechanism.
- I am not a fan at all of the census-based funding for special education. I realize that communities and school districts think differently about special education. However, it is crystal clear that some districts have a higher percentage of pupils who are truly special needs than others. In a small district the percentage can change dramatically simply by a few families, or even one, with several children in this category. This can be true for many different and unique reasons. The point is that the percentage of children identified as special needs varies considerably from district to district; thus a census-based dollar allocation does not work. In a perfect world where all families are created equally and all districts are so established, a census-based system might make sense. But that is not reality. I am not sure why the census-based system was ever established. It does not make sense.

In conclusion, the issue really gets down to what does the legislature feel comfortable with in terms of total cost of education, how to raise the funds for public schools, how long should children ride on a bus, what do the professional groups want, what do parents want, what do taxpayers want, what do students need,

whose responsibility is the education of our youth and a host of similar questions. **Without a doubt, the state has an obligation to ensure that all children have access to an equal educational opportunity regardless of zip code or the socio-economic strata of the family.**