

My name is Pam Reed. I am a life-long resident of Rutland and currently serve as the Director of Support Services, Equity and Inclusion for Rutland City Public Schools. I am joining you today to assert my support for the implementation of pupil weights, as described by the University of Vermont in their evaluation of the census-based Special Education Block Grant.

The census-based approach to the funding of special education outlined in Act 173 assumes that the incidence of students with disabilities, and the extent of their need is the same across school districts. It does not account for the population-based differences that impact the frequency and intensity of our communities. The census-based system will result in higher taxes in towns and cities with more students with disabilities and/or students with greater need which will lead to an inequitable system and educational opportunities for our children.

Data has long substantiated the correlation between the rate of poverty and the identification of disability. In 2019, the United States Census Bureau found that children living in poverty were more likely to have a disability (at a rate of 6.5%) in comparison to children living above the poverty threshold (only 3.8%). Further, according to the 2019 data, 25.9 percent of people with disabilities were living in poverty, while just 11.4 percent of people without disabilities were living in poverty. The researchers at the University of Vermont also noted the correlation between the extent of economic disadvantage in a school district and the percentage of students with disabilities in their evaluation of the census-based special education block grant. We must find a way to accommodate for this correlation in our funding system.

Calculating the census grant using pupil weights allows for the rate of poverty, and therefore disability, to be implicitly accounted for. It maintains the census-based funding approach and retains predictability and transparency. Additionally, it is straightforward to administer. Most of all, applying the pupil weighting factors will generate sufficient revenue for communities with higher levels of need. Communities like mine.

I believe you all want what is best for Vermont children. I also believe that equal and equity are two very different terms. Equal means everyone gets the same. Equity means everyone gets what they need. The census-based block grant for special education funding provides an equal amount of funding per student whereas applying the pupil weights provides an equitable amount, helping all students get what they need.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.