

Dear Chair Kornheiser and members of the House Committee on Ways and Means,

For a change I'm going to try and keep this email relatively short.

I understand there is strong political pressure to move fast. I also understand that there are some who don't want to let a crisis go to waste. Please take off your political hat as you read what I have to share... Also please understand that I have a very strong understanding of the education finance system in Vermont as well as our multilayered governance structures and I'm an advocate for a much stronger public school system than we currently have. For the record, today I am NOT writing to you wearing my Coalition for Vermont Student Equity hat.

I've read through the draft yield bill (understanding it's just the first draft.) I watched the entire W&M hearing this afternoon. While maybe a bit on the sarcastic side, this is my interpretation of what you are all proposing:

The last major change to our education funding formula, Act 127, isn't yet implemented. FY25 won't be a year where districts that had been harmed by a quarter century of a formula derived in smoky backroom deals, can take advantage of added taxing capacity because of the many unrelated upward pressures on budgets.

Instead of letting the last major change to the education formula actually take effect and play out, you all are going to push through a complete rewrite of the education formula in the last 4 weeks of the session, using the carrot that districts will know their tax rate when they set their budget and the assumption, proven wrong during the Act 127 debate, that it costs the same to educate a kid regardless of where in the state that kid lives. Let's not forget to mention that the formula being proposed is based on a person's research who hasn't been able to stop himself from demeaning our own in-state expert researchers.

A foundation formula, whether you call it 'cost equity' or 'educational opportunity payments,' is still a foundation formula. I can't speak to the constitutionality of your proposed foundation formula, but before upending a system and failing to allow your last legislation the time to affect the intended changes, I believe what you've called a 'reshuffling of the deck chairs,' and for it all to sugar out, maybe take the time to start with the fundamental question of whether your plan passes the Brigham smell test.

If it does, I'd suggest you then listen to the very loud chorus of voices asking you to let the policy dictate the finances. Just because you're Ways and Means and CAN make all the changes your heart desires, doesn't mean you should. Real power doesn't come from making drastic change after drastic change after drastic change... it comes from learning and studying from the past to make things better for the people of Vermont. Playing whack-a-mole with a sledgehammer doesn't make you powerful, it makes you reactionary.

Remember the last bill that got pushed through the legislature in the waning weeks of a session? The PCB testing bill. Years later that good sounding bill is still causing significant policy and fiscal problems. Very little that is in this draft bill has received any public discussion. Please don't repeat the mistakes of the PCB testing bill.

Thank you,
Marc Schauber, Dover
Public School Advocate