

**Date:** April 4, 2024

**To:** Vermont House Committee on Ways and Means

**From:** Representative Jed Lipsky (Stowe)

**Re:** Testimony regarding Education Spending

Dear Committee Members and Fellow Legislators,

For the record, I am Representative Jed Lipsky. First, I would like to thank the committee for the time to share at today's hearing and your dedication to tackling some very complex issues. It has been a privilege to serve in my second year in the house, bringing my experience and expertise as a small business owner, former school board member, logger, and long-time Vermonter to these conversations. Vermont is an incredible place to raise children-and our schools are filled with amazing educators and students. I am here today as I worry we are losing the trust of our communities and taxpayers.

On Town Meeting Day, over a third of school budgets were defeated. This represents the largest number in recent history and demands our urgent attention. Vermonters have signaled loudly they cannot afford the significant property tax increases that have resulted from an unprecedented level of education spending across the state. With a declining population, aging infrastructure, and shifting demographics, **this is a crossroads moment for public education in Vermont.**

In the current model, school boards determine their spending, voters approve and then the legislature is responsible for funding these decisions. Due to our incentive structures and the political dynamics that play out in each town, spending does not always result in improved student outcomes. Quite often, districts that should be investing more, decide to use taxing capacity to reduce tax rates. Districts that should be spending less, decide to use taxing capacity to increase spending even more. Until this year, many voters have not truly understood how closely we are tied together by our local spending decisions.

Per the Brigham Decision, we have a constitutional requirement to provide an equitable education to *every* Vermont student. The current funding formula is not meeting that requirement and until we have a new formula in place, a quality education for all Vermont students will not be possible. This will take time and should be a top priority of our next legislative session.

In the meantime, we must contain costs and prevent this situation from occurring again next year.

In conversations with school leaders, community members, and other legislators, I ask the committee to consider the following:

**First, please reinstate the excess spending threshold:** This was a tool that has been used successfully in the past to hold districts to reasonable increases in spending. In a shared system, we must ensure there is enough for everyone without over-taxing our residents.

**Second, please reinstate ballot language that is transparent to voters:** We must rebuild trust by providing voters with the actual spending increases per pupil. With new terminology such as Long-term weighted Average Daily Membership, voters believe the system is designed to intentionally confuse or make it appear that spending is less than it is. Our communities will make responsible decisions if they have the right information. Voters need to understand what the increase is in year over year spending.

As mentioned, these are only short-term steps until a more thorough and comprehensive plan can be put in place to redesign the funding formula.

I greatly appreciate your time and commitment to the students of Vermont.

Representative Jed Lipsky  
Stowe, Vermont