

Biannual Review of Secondary Weighting Factor (16 V.S.A. § 4010 (i))

Recommendation for FY2015 Equalized Pupils

Overview

A primary factor in Vermont's education funding formula is the concept of equalized pupils. An equalized pupil can be thought of as an average pupil in terms of educational costs. An equalized pupil within a school district would have the same cost as any other equalized pupil, whereas the actual cost per pupil of individual students varies.

Various categories of students are presumed to have significantly higher or lower educational costs. Vermont statute recognizes four such categories (current weighting factors are in parentheses):

1. prekindergarten children, including those receiving essential early education services (0.46);
2. secondary students, grades 7 through 12 (1.13);
3. students from economically deprived backgrounds (1.25 by formula); and
4. students for whom English is not their primary language (1.20).

Up until FY2007, the weighting factor for secondary students had been 1.25, based on the assumption that the cost to educate a secondary student was 25% greater than the cost to educate an elementary student. However, there was general consensus that average costs for secondary students were lower than 25% of those for elementary students. A study of FY2007 budget data suggested secondary costs per pupil were approximately 13% higher than elementary costs per pupil rather than 25%. Legislation enacted during the 2007 session changed the secondary weighting factor to 1.13 for FY2009 (2007, No. 82, § 7).

Act 82 also included a statutory biannual requirement for the commissioner of education to study the accuracy of the weights and to recommend adjustments, if any:

16 V.S.A. § 4010. Determination of weighted membership

(i) The commissioner shall evaluate the accuracy of the weights established in subsection (c) of this section and, at the beginning of each biennium, shall propose to the house and senate committees on education whether the weights should stay the same or be adjusted.

The first of the follow-up studies in 2009 recommended keeping the secondary weight at 1.13 for the FY2011 equalized pupil count, based on FY2009 data. Based on FY2011 data, the second study in 2011 calculated a secondary weight of 1.18 to maintain equitable costs per equalized pupil for elementary and secondary levels. Upon recommendation from the Department of Education, the Legislature maintained the current weight of 1.13.

Data and Methodology

Of the four pupil categories to which weighting factors are assigned, it is currently only feasible to look at the accuracy of the secondary weighting factor for secondary union

schools and the elementary schools from the towns that are members of those union schools. These are the only types of school districts in which a separation of costs for elementary and secondary students can be isolated. Budget data are not reported in such a fashion that would allow the isolation of secondary and elementary costs for school districts that are not members of secondary union schools. Unless a district belongs to a union high school, expenditure data are reported as an aggregate prekindergarten through grade twelve number. It is not possible to disaggregate those expenditure data to prekindergarten, elementary, and secondary levels under the current submission process. Requiring school districts to track costs by elementary and secondary grade levels would place a significant burden on school district business managers.

Isolating costs attributed to students from an economically deprived background or those for English Language Learners is a far more complex task. School districts do not currently track those costs separately, as expenditures for those two categories of students are spread across functions. In order to ascertain those costs, business managers would need to significantly change their current practices and track costs by student. Additionally, these two categories are not grade specific but rather span the entire grade spectrum.

While costs for prekindergarten children, including those receiving essential early education services, are now reported separately from other costs, the equalized pupils are not calculated by grade level. A calculation at grade level would require a statutory change.

The methodology looked at the secondary spending per equalized pupil statewide and compared that to the statewide figure for elementary spending per equalized pupil. If the result of dividing the secondary spending per pupil by the elementary spending per pupil approaches 1.00, the secondary weighting factor is considered to be correct. At a secondary weight of 1.15, the ratio of FY2013 secondary spending per pupil to elementary is 1.00. (The ratio using FY2012 data is 1.01.)

Recommendation for Secondary Weighting

A study of FY2012 and FY2013 budget data suggests that a secondary weight of 1.15 is appropriate in order to maintain equitable costs per equalized pupil between the elementary and secondary levels.

Table 1: FY2013 budget data

1.15 Secondary Weighting Factor	Count	Education Spending (ES)	Equalized Pupils (EP)	ES / EP	Ratio: secondary / elementary
Union high schools, statewide	27	\$234,911,327	17,781	\$13,211	1.00
Local elementary costs of member districts, statewide	124	\$189,023,827	14,318	\$13,202	

It should be noted that the above method is looking at the state as a whole. District by district results will vary.