

Vermont Evidence Based Adequacy Study

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The Picus study advances and clarifies some of our fiscal issues.

General - The major findings are not surprising and are generally well-known. Staff ratios are low. Special education is a major cost-driver. The large number of aides is problematic. Per pupil spending is high. Achievement is high.

Overall, the study has all the advantages and disadvantages of the evidence based method. If everyone agreed on what the “evidence” said, then things would be easier. Therein lies the rub. The study was strengthened by professional judgment panels and a hybrid case-study successful schools perspective.

Are the comparable’s comparable? - The threshold question, however, is whether our costs can be compared so directly, whether the literature is applicable to Vermont, and whether one size fits all. The big problem is that the very small schools in Vermont don’t have a meaningful equivalent in the literature. Here are some concerns:

- The base elementary school model in the study is for 357 students. That is a large size and an outlier in Vermont terms. Whether the program and finance extrapolations hold is a bit speculative and there’s nothing to test this assumption. It assumes a linear function -- which is doubtful. Very small schools have lumpy distributions of students and staff and variations get larger as the number decreases.
- Preschool costs may be a case of apples and oranges. It appears that this cost is included in the Vermont numbers but is not likely contained in the comparisons. This is not public school expenditures and probably needs to be backed out.
- Transfer costs (the bane of finance statistics) are particularly high in Vermont. That is, School A pays tuition to School B and both are counted in the expenditures. It’s a double-count.
- A related problem is that costs are allocated differently from one SU to another. Some have special education and transportation centralized and others do not. This exacerbates the transfer double-count.
- Small schools will naturally show a higher percentage and cost of administrative staff.
- The additive costs of the adequacy model are very likely not comparable to the outdated NCES and census data which was used. Were the old numbers adjusted for inflation? (The NEA data base was not available but it suffers from too many extrapolations anyway).
- Exclusions. Transportation, food, and capital are excluded from the main comparison. But transportation and food service are examined separately.

Some one-off observations --

- Depending on who you read, optimal class size continues to diminish down to one, or hits a bend around thirteen students, or should be 25. Pragmatic, normative and finance driven decisions are the norm. It is true that most adequacy studies use 25 but that is not evidence

based. The 17 figure is more appropriate but that is a consensus opinion. The problem is the usual rules don't apply in very small schools. Schools tend to round up with lumpy distributions which lower the class size. Since this is far and away the biggest cost driver, slight changes make a big difference.

- Most likely, there are more aides than needed but the recommendation to eliminate them entirely is a reach too far. You still need wheel-chair pushers and aides for disturbed children even if it has no effect on test scores. The citations suggest the researchers may have gone too far. There are some indications that the use of aides is uneven across the state.
- Some of the evidence based sections are more current and accurate than others. These things are in continuous flux.
- The child count is correctly reported as high and begs for exploration.
- The ten step school improvement strategy is not very dependent on adequacy. Both can and do vary independently. In other words, you can adopt or ignore good practice independent of cost.
- "Data based decision making" with assessment links is very popular but the body of research does not support the claims. Look at NWEA MAP for example and the lower PARCC scores with computer applications.
- The \$10,000 per teacher CTE costs appears arbitrary.
- ELL appears light at 1:100 teacher ratio. It also does not mesh with other adequacy studies.
- Special ed staff is based on a ratio to general ed students. Unfortunately, IEP students are not randomly distributed which makes this approach go long or go short depending on your district.

The struggling student discussion offers a variety of techniques and programs that have been proven effective in various contexts. A major recommendation, tutors, relies on research from the previous millennia (in both sections) and needs updating. However, the set as a whole is basically sound. Unfortunately, the presentation does not include typical categorical weights. Thus the costs comparisons are hard to evaluate.

Conclusions – These questions aside, this is a better than average adequacy study and the technique has improved over time. The final report corrects many small errors in the original report. The greatest value will be in informing and initiating necessary conversations. Notably absent is any review of the funding system. It remains a very equitable system although buffeted by enrollment declines. The greatest danger to the efficiency of the formula is from the accumulated distortions of annual tinkering through legislative amendments.

Arguably the most damaging reaction to the Picus report would be to legislate some kind of caps or ratios on staffing – which sets up the potential for a new caps fiasco like the one we just experienced. (Besides, staffing ratios already exist in state board rules). The diversity in the state cautions us regarding micro-managing through one uniform top down set of rules. Let the original allowable spending ceiling do the work. Act 46 needs to play-out and it will have long-term consequences on faculty and staff -- which requires patience. Ultimately, staff reductions are necessary but that decline always lags behind student declines. The student-staff adjustment has to play itself out as the continuing cascade causes per pupil costs to spiral upwards -- while absolute dollar increases are modest and percent of GDP remains stable.