

Full text of the Change.org petition to the Legislature from the Westford, Vermont community (view it here: <http://chn.ge/1am3B4M>):

Amend the Education Finance Bill! Create an exception to the phase out of the "Hold Harmless" provision for districts that meet or exceed the statewide average for student/teacher ratios

We need to amend the education finance bill and allow an exception to the phase out of the hold harmless provision for declining enrollment.

The phase out should impact districts whose student to teacher ratios are below the statewide average only. Districts that have worked diligently to reduce staff as the student population has declined should not be punished for "right-sizing" their classrooms. The hold harmless provision was created because it is not always possible to reduce teaching and support staff in direct proportion to the decline in students; there is a threshold below which a school should not go. Westford School, for example, is at that threshold now. Serious impact to school quality is our next stop.

Right-sizing classrooms is a painful but necessary process for towns like Westford that struggle to pay dramatically rising property taxes. Westford school's enrollment is now roughly half what it was in the mid 1990s (and yet it is still a mid-sized school by Vermont standards). Over the last two decades the Westford School Board has followed a class size policy created by using the state quality standards. As result the school has dramatically cut staffing. Current class size average for Westford K-8 is 19.9 students (2015). State average is 13. We have one teacher per grade/classroom, and we also have "specials" (art, music, literacy specialist etc.). As result our student/teacher ratio is 12.1. The state average is 9.9.

If the hold harmless provision for declining enrollment is phased out for Westford, the town will face soaring property tax increases with declining enrollment, and yet there is nowhere left to cut but vital student services. Westford students get limited art and music. The foreign language program was cut in half with last year's budget (ending the offering to grades 5 and 6). Next year's budget (up for re-vote May 5th) shaves yet more time off the media specialist position and as result the community may face losing a longtime dedicated staff member who is a hallmark of quality in that building. The school has close to 200 children and still needs a nurse and counselor, etc.

Districts like Westford that have made the effort to "right-size" their classrooms should NOT be treated in the same manner as those that have not. As the letter from the Westford School Board on this issue has articulated: "It is akin to the teacher who punishes the whole class for the misbehavior of a few."

Creating this exception would provide an incentive for districts to reduce staffing (those that need to), which would GREATLY benefit districts like Westford that end up paying for the reluctance of others. Westford is not a wealthy town. Residents are voting down the school budgets out of fear and frustration. There is a strong sentiment that the system is broken and Montpelier needs to get the message. Please create this exception and recognize the hard work and hours that communities like Westford have diligently applied to being responsible to the statewide education funding picture. Please, do, get this message.