

To: House Education Committee
From: Caitlin Hollister, Chair, Harwood Unified Union School Board
Re: FY 2021 Education Funding
Date: April 24, 2020

Thank you for inviting me to offer testimony today to the House Education Committee. I want to be clear that I am speaking today for myself, in my role as chair, but not on behalf of the Board as we have not met since April 8th.

The Harwood Unified Union School District serves over 1800 students in grades PreK - 12 from the towns of Duxbury, Fayston, Moretown, Waitsfield, Warren and Waterbury. Our proposed budget of \$37.7 million was rejected by our voters on Town Meeting Day. I come before you today, encouraged by your interest in offering districts like ours a path forward that will allow us the necessary stability to serve our students and operate effectively next year - a school year likely to be the most challenging any of us have experienced.

Our district has been engaged in hard conversations, especially over the past year, about how we might consolidate our seven campuses to better serve our students and our community. We recognize the very tough reality that our Vermont towns were already facing before the pandemic - a reality of shrinking school-age populations, increases in health care costs that greatly impact school budgets, and tax burdens many families already found to be crippling. As a district that voluntarily merged under Act 46, we have shown a willingness to engage in the state's efforts to rethink the way our schools operate.

We all know that our society has asked more of our schools in recent years. We increasingly expect our educators to mitigate the effects of trauma on our children, to counsel families, to provide childcare, as well as to innovate, to redesign our approach to teaching and grading, and now, to engage in online, remote learning. As a society, we could decide to provide some of these services elsewhere, but we all know this is unlikely and our schools now have strong systems in place to do this incredibly important work. Recognizing that our schools will be expected to do **more** next year, not less, I ask you to offer us the necessary support to meet this daunting challenge.

In the midst of this crisis, I urge you to allow all school districts to operate effectively so that we can meet the dramatic needs in front of us. This means granting spending authority to districts like ours for FY21 equal to 100% of our FY2020 education spending plus a reasonable inflator to ensure that we can all provide essential student services in a time when our families will need school support more than ever.

This spending authority will accomplish three key goals: 1) allow us to avoid a budget revote (or multiple re-votes), keeping voters and election workers at home rather than adding to our state's public health burden; 2) offer assurance to our employees, most of whom received RIF notices after our failed budget vote and will continue to be in limbo until we have an approved budget;

and 3) provide clarity to our community members that our schools will be adequately funded for the next school year at a level comparable to our neighboring districts.

I am deeply concerned about extending the already intense sense of uncertainty among our staff into June or beyond. Within the last few weeks, our district has lost several teachers, many from the high school in disciplines very hard to replace, to more financially stable districts. We have asked a tremendous amount from our educators this year and no one can tell them what our next school year will look like as this pandemic continues. What you can do, however, is enable us to secure our staff for the fall and help them to stay focused on the very challenging work underway this spring.

We know that the state's financial picture is unlikely to improve before fall, but the short months ahead will provide us all with vital planning time. I am committed to working with my Board, as well as all of our partners at the local and statewide levels to consider all options, make difficult decisions, think creatively, and make sacrifices so that we can continue to serve our students and their families in the years ahead.

I know the decisions before you have no easy answers and I am grateful for your consideration of my testimony today. Please know that the spending authority we are requesting will allow us to support our students, staff and taxpayers when they need us most. Thank you.