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S. Mason Testimony on Weighing Poverty in our Schools

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As the school board chair of the Lowell Graded School for the past 16 Years, and the member for North Country Supervisory Union board during that time, as well as being the NCSU board chair for the last 6 years, I've seen many of our schools in the Northeast Kingdom work their way through one crisis after another.

Annually, we undergo what I call "budget anxiety" - will our communities support our carefully crafted budgets? This while knowing that they will likely present to the community a school budget that our schools regularly are among the per-pupil-cost in the state of Vermont. Our boards, while we are aware that our primary responsibility is fiduciary, we all know that we serve the students first.

In addition to the anxiety over whether the budget will pass muster with our fiscally conservative constituents – households that are for the most part operating on the fringe of the economic spectrum - a main worry is the loss of whatever additional support we get because of our high poverty status. The disappearance several years ago of school construction grants, reduction in Titles funding, threats of losing small school grants. Our schools were first in line to pay out of their school budget meals costs for those students that were unable to start their day with a meal and not hunger.

Given some of our more rural, economically disadvantaged communities Vermont needs to be at the forefront of enacting policies aimed at narrowing differences in spending across districts, increasing the resources available to districts that serve disadvantaged students, or both.

Recent research indicates that these efforts lead to increased test scores, educational attainment, and wages, especially among children from low-income families. Currently, 35 states have a provision in their formula that provides additional funding to districts serving more low-income students. These provisions should make school funding more progressive by spending more money on students from low-income families.

We all realize that progressive funding formulas on paper do not achieve this goal in practice, and that, in many cases, the potential progressivity of school funding is constrained by patterns of student sorting by income. We have taken chances with theoretical constructs regarding the efficacy of mergers, it's time to practice some advances, even if only theoretical, that address our poverty gap!

This is NOT a "oh, poor us" request, it is an equity issue and it needs to be appropriately addressed or it will continue to harm our most vulnerable children. Our schools are already providing social services that used to be appropriately funded by State agencies but no longer are. Our administrators and teachers collect clothes and food to help our families. You need to recognize that in many of our communities, our schools are the first line for education and family support. Hear me, that is the reality.