

Samantha Stevens
Equity and Community Outreach Coordinator
North Country Supervisory Union

Testimony to the Vermont Legislature,
Senate Education Committee
March 11, 2020

I am Samantha Stevens, Equity and Community Outreach Coordinator for North Country Supervisory Union. It is a new position in our SU, born from an ever expanding need to address access and opportunity challenges that affect students in our rural Vermont communities. These aren't educational needs, at their core, they are basic needs- for food, clothing, shelter, physical and mental health care. Without meeting them first, no effort to educate will be successful.

I work in education, not social services, not counseling, because I believe that education is the only way out of generational poverty- the only way that my community will overcome it's 18-20% child poverty rate, and the only way that our people will have the tools they need to build our towns and villages into flourishing communities for all of our citizens.

All of Vermont is also relying on our rural schools to create this capacity to build flourishing communities. Our bucolic hill and valley towns are economic drivers of our shared economy, and a lot rides on the stewardship of our natural landscape to continue to bring visitors from away who will spend time and money here. There is a perennial discussion in this State of the tenuous balance between growth and stagnation- growth usually means the opportunity for higher incomes and better services to our population, stagnation means preserving the pastoral scenes marketed by the tourism industry many still rely on.

In rural Vermont the social and economic conditions we live in are a direct result of our remote location, a location some residents chose to live in, seduced by the bucolic vision pedaled by our tourism industry and relied on by the Vermont economic machine. To be sure, there are some people who can afford to choose stagnation. But plenty of folks in our rural towns did not make a decision to live without the employment opportunities, conveniences, resources, and infrastructure that our larger population communities take for granted. Some people live here because they don't have a choice.

A beautiful location, with a stagnant economy, is in a position to take what it gets: When the landfill, the prison, and the opioids moved in, these folks were already at a disadvantage, most unable to escape the associated pollution and traumas. They didn't choose to raise their children in an area where poverty is compounded by isolation, and their families deserve an equitable solution to moving out of conditions of poverty without having to leave their home communities. Education is the answer.

According to some school and community partners, I'm the person to call for help with our "most challenging families". In my view, it's not the families who are challenging, it is the

conditions that our state and nation have determined acceptable for them to struggle through, which our schools are faced to address on top of every other curricular and regulatory innovation.

Thirty years ago, when I was growing up in the same Kingdom community, the closest position we had to mine was “home and school coordinator”. But a lot has changed. Agricultural and manufacturing work is gone, and almost no one can afford to raise a family on one income. Social services have disappeared. In our area, capacity issues ended their outreach into rural communities and consolidated all the services into one “hub”, usually at least a 30 minute drive for most rural residents. Today, one of the most important supports I offer families and high school-aged students is help accessing and completing online applications for food stamps and Reach Up. They don’t have computers, they don’t have internet or cell service, and they don’t have transportation that could get them to a “hub”.

Every reduction and flat-funded budget that the Vermont Legislature has passed, be that in childcare, mental and physical health care, child protection, technology infrastructure, transportation, has had a more perilous effect on our rural communities than on any other area in this State. And nearly every “fix” that has been developed as a solution to those service cuts have required access technology or transportation- resources that families in poverty do not have.

I wonder, what is the comparison between cuts to the AHS budget and increases in our local education spending? There are research studies to come about that issue, but I can tell you with complete certainty today, that every service that has been cut has been felt by our education system. For every community mental health program that has been cut, a school-based counselor or behavior support position has been created. For every family who has timed-out or fallen off the cliff of their Reach Up grant, one or more children have needed three school meals and two snacks a day in order to overcome hunger and access their learning because food is not available at home. And we don’t stop there, we send bags of food home too, because the weekend comes, or the vacation comes, and our students are panicking about food insecurity as we approach those breaks and we know that the nutrition is needed at home.

This budget shift, from State-based services to local education budgets is mimicked in so many areas:

It costs rural school systems more:

When we have to budget to provide our own broadband networks.

When we have to build in transportation funding for afterschool sports and educational programming that have been regionalized due to lack of population density.

When we have to provide appropriate clothing and footwear for students to participate in daily educational activities.

When we have to send teachers out of the district to attend essential professional development activities only available in locations an hour or more from home.

When we have to hire additional special services for students who have experienced trauma and have associated learning challenges that affect them, and every other student in their classroom.

When we have to continually hire and train new teachers because their vicarious experiences of trauma lead them to choose to leave the teaching profession.

When we take on coordination of dental care, mental and physical health appointments so students can focus on their learning.

We fill bellies, and partner with the food bank to send bags home, we clothe and sometimes launder for our students. We bring in dental services, we transport to mental health appointments. We build behavior teams; we teach our staff how to teach our children how to manage heavy and painful experiences that create lasting trauma. We lose our teachers to their own vicarious experiences with those traumas, and we start of the next day, the next year, strategizing and collaborating and stretching and reaching and reaching into our shallow pockets to create --from scratch-- the capacity to meet needs that are so far beyond what "education" used to look like, that our grandparents can hardly grasp the duties our community schools are now responsible to achieve.

The issues we are now addressing are not frivolous. They are each known to be major threats to our children's resilience and readiness to learn. The supports that help families in other parts of the state manage and mitigate issues like these either do not exist in our communities: like homeless shelters, public transportation, broadband internet and cellular service, fully staffed DCF and human services offices.

We understand the science of learning, and we understand the science of trauma. We understand that the greatest symptoms of trauma are seen in our youngest children and the number of preschoolers with complex social and learning needs today leads us to have grave concerns for our ability to meet the needs of the children who will continue to come to us with challenges both founded and compounded by rural poverty.

We are, and will continue doing everything we possibly can to meet those needs. The North Country Supervisory Union has spent five years or more working to build an inter-district commitment to the idea that every child in this SU is OUR Child, and we are here because we need our State to get on board with that commitment and bring resources to help with our effort.

Rural Vermonters have been paying into a taxation system that routinely redirects our education dollars to other, more populated, parts of the state. This assertion has now been confirmed by the Per Pupil Weighting Factors report issued by the Agency of Education.

The people who will argue loudly against making this shift will be the people whose children are already starting out ahead. You will need to have courage, just as all of us who bring testimony today have had to garner our courage, to speak and act on our community's behalf. The rural citizens of this state who need this the most are relying on you, our legislators, to be their voice, to be their champions, to recognize and rectify an unfair situation that has consequences that will last for generations. You will determine what WE, as a State, do to address these disparities.

Please lift up the children who need you the most, and respond to the research presented by your own Agency of Education through this report. Adjust the weighting system that is creating further disadvantage in our rural communities.

Jeannie Lowell

From: John Spicer <mossfarm@svcable.net>
Sent: Wednesday, March 11, 2020 10:24 AM
To: Testimony
Subject: weighting formula

Dear House Committee on Judiciary,

I have been a resident of Vermont since 1977 with grandchildren working through the elementary system in small schools in S. Vermont. The cost of educating individual students has gone up at a greater rate based upon a formula for weighing student cost from 1997. It has not been updated to include additional costs for small schools. I recommend that you take action to move your recommendations of 2018 forward to relieve the unfair taxation increasingly put upon our small communities. This needs to be done in order that students receive equal opportunity in their own schools. The geography especially of S. Vermont and valleys with steep hills makes transporting young students a hazardous requirement for a daily regime of having to take small children to larger unionized school, as you must be aware.

Thank you in advance ,

John T. Spicer
S. Newfane, Vt.

Jeannie Lowell

From: DAVID DIRCKS <davedircks@mac.com>
Sent: Wednesday, March 11, 2020 9:56 AM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

I am writing to strongly urge the Senate Committee on Education to require the Agency of Education to adopt and implement the new pupil weighting factors in the calculation of local property taxes. In the 2019 Pupil Weighting Study Report the inequities that have existed for two decades, and the failure of the Agency of Education and Legislature to recognize, analyze, and rectify these inequalities were at last laid bare for all to see.

The weighting study clearly point to failures within the agency and the Legislature to monitor and assess enacted policies. These failures have place an undue financial burden on many Vermont communities while benefiting others. As residents of Wilmington, my wife and I have been shocked by the property taxes assessed on our home as a downstream result of Vermont's existing pupil weighting factors in the calculation of local property taxes. It thus appears that without some intervention on the part of the legislature, our taxes will continue to increase to help make up the shortfall.

The proposed new weighting factors that take into account population density and poverty would result in a much more equitable allocation of the tax burden and provide some much needed relief to towns like Wilmington. I hope that the Senate Committee on Education will strongly support the effort to make this a reality as soon as possible. Doing so will help make amends for the burdens this inequality has placed upon Vermont taxpayers for the past two decades.

Thank you for your *timely* attention and consideration of having a hard look at the Pupil Weighting Study.

David Dircks

Jeannie Lowell

From: Testimony
Subject: FW: Pupil Weighting Testimony/Perspective

From: Abbie Corse <abbie.corse@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 9:45 PM
Subject: Pupil Weighting Testimony/Perspective

I grew up in a house where Act 60 was a four letter word. I was born and raised on my family's dairy farm in very southern Vermont, in Whitingham. As far as this state is concerned, my husband and I have done everything right. We took the opportunities available and were both able to graduate from one of the last K-12 schools in the state. We graduated valedictorian three years apart and went on to UVM (he) and Saint Michael's College (me) both on full tuition scholarships. We traveled a bit, gained some work and life experience and ultimately found ourselves in the position of needing to decide whether to move back to VT or not. A barn fire ultimately tipped our hand; I found that I couldn't fathom a life where I wasn't tied to the land my family had stewarded since 1868. I didn't know how to conceive of not trying to be here and help shepherd this land forth into the next generation. So we moved back.

And just as the decision to return to farming was fraught, so too was the decision to move back to our hometown, where we had both struggled to find opportunity and support for our interests and passions as youth. Though on paper we are both "success" stories, we knew deeply the struggles we had faced integrating into college, the challenges that had come from not being properly prepared for what that level of education would require. And frankly, we had both left this town swearing to never return. I had watched my mother navigate tricky school board negotiations while Whitingham and then Wilmington with whom we subsequently consolidated tried to advocate on behalf of their underserved students, as they attempted to explain to taxpayers why their taxes were going up, but their kids weren't seeing any benefit from it. My mother's family was in northern Vermont so I had cousins attending high school in Milton and at Mt. Mansfield - I KNEW firsthand the types of opportunity with which they were presented and I equally knew that there wasn't a chance any of that would be extended in the direction of our tiny, forgotten school.

I want to be very upfront that I do not entirely understand everything covered within the Pupil Weighting Factors Report, but I would like to share with you a few of the things I do know. I know that the single most difficult factor to weigh in moving back to Vermont and more specifically Whitingham, was the knowledge that we would consciously be putting our children back into an education system that we had both felt left us improperly prepared for higher education. We knew that we would be choosing a place of less opportunity for our children. We knew that moving back here would mean that we would have to work twice as hard to ensure our children had access to music, theater, art, sports, travel opportunities, and diversity. And I have to tell you, as a farmer and a builder, neither a profession which offers predictability in either schedule or finances this is quite a daunting task. I know too, that when you look up properties in this area our schools are rated terribly. In order for an elementary student to be involved in band, they must either have a parent who can bring them to the school at 7:30 AM or stay after school and be picked up. This district where we live has very few good, stable jobs. Many parents have to travel, most parents are both working, and there isn't consistent, reliable after school care. The Wings program does an incredible job filling in some of those gaps, but it doesn't solve the underlying problem. I attribute the majority of my success to four things; my incredibly supportive parents, this farm on which I grew up, my music teacher, and my art teacher. Without those factors I would have been lost. And to be engaged deeply in art and music when I was a student did not require my parents to do anything other than put me on the bus in the morning and be there in the afternoon when it came. Particularly when you're dealing with a population rife with trauma and poverty these opportunities outside of traditional academics are crucial for engagement. But our students spend less time engaged in science, less time with music and art, less time outside. And they are suffering for it.

For the record, I, in no way, blame our teachers or students or parents for this. We have been incredibly impressed by the efforts we have seen on the part of our children's teachers, our parental peers, and the students of our schools to overcome the obstacles this state has put in front of them. There are amazing things happening here because of the tireless efforts on the part of the amazing souls who have chosen to be here and assist and inspire our kids. Our schools recently restructured things to bring in additional staff to attempt to assist with the realities of the trauma that is plaguing so many of our students here. And I commend each and every one of the staff of our local schools for attempting to be there for our students, to provide not just education, but emotional and psychological support. But it is absurd to me what is happening here and how little interest the state has shown in the well being of these children. As economic realities make it more and more difficult to live here; when a young family is looking for Vermont real estate and they find school ratings of a 2 out of 10 with a disproportionately high tax rate for the services they receive, they won't move here.

I know this because neither of my brothers are here, in this town. They have both relocated to places where they could find jobs that could support their families, where their kids would have more opportunity, where they could access childcare, where they could have a more equitable shot at success. I know this because the only reason I'm here is because I cannot move this farm. And I've heard the arguments; if you don't like it, leave. If your job isn't paying enough get another one. If your farm is struggling, farm a different way. If the school doesn't serve your kids the way you want, you can move. These attitudes are decimating good will and our ability to create compassionate solutions to support the entirety of Vermont's citizens. They ignore the psychological and economical realities of what it takes to move. Of what it takes to be healthy. Of what it takes to be capable. When we are seeing in data now that poverty actually impacts the literal size of a child's brain we need to be taking very seriously the way we structure the methods in which we support our most vulnerable citizens; our kids. And that cannot mean that we only support schools in places the state has deemed acceptable for support. We need to be building out a system of support for schools such that young families wish to move here. So we can build up small, resilient communities that create a flourishing and vibrant economy. We can't all live in the population centers of this state and while education may look different in the places that don't bear those names, it should be no less equitable to the education kids receive there. And honestly, I refuse to accept that in Vermont, of all places, I should have to choose between my family's 150+-yr-old farm and the equitable education of my children.

I deeply appreciate your time and would greatly appreciate your continued attention and thought to this matter. We need to begin to think about how we want all the children of Vermont to be treated and how to ensure that this is feasible no matter where someone chooses to live in our beautiful state. A child is not responsible for their poverty, for their trauma, for their pain and currently, our state's priorities with education leave them holding those realities with little hope for a better life.

Bio: Abbie Corse serves on the board of NOFA-VT, VHCB's Farm & Forest Viability Advisory Board, on the Secretary of Agriculture's Dairy Advisory Panel, as an Act 250 Commissioner and a Justice of the Peace. She was recognized in November by Vermont Business Magazine as one of their 40 under 40 Rising Stars. You can read her most recent writing at Civil Eats: <https://civileats.com/2019/10/30/im-a-farmer-and-a-mother-both-roles-should-be-valued-more>.

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The Corse Farm Dairy
Instagram: @thecorsefarm
www.thecorsefarmdairy.com

"...Out on the edge you see all the kinds of things you can't see from the center..."
kurt vonnegut

Jeannie Lowell

From: Jenepher Burnell <jlaelburnell@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 9:21 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pupil Weighting Factors Report

To the Vermont Senate Education Committee and Vermont House Education Committee,

We respectfully request your Committees push for changes to the student weighting formula.

Our smaller schools struggled to find basic educational needs to end up penalized due to the current funding formula.

Tax rates are too high, causing families to leave and enrollment to decline.

The Pupil Weighting Factors Report has found a need for change in the formula.

Jenepher L Burnell Whitingham
Christopher M Crafts Wilmington

Jeannie Lowell

From: Testimony
Subject: FW: Pupil Weighting Study

From: Robert M. Fisher <rmfisher1967@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 9:03 PM
To: Testimony <testimony@leg.state.vt.us>
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

Dear Legislators:

We, the Fisher family, Robert, Sarah and Finn Fisher, of Wilmington, write as Moderator, Selectboard member and student at Twin Valley High School to plead with you to accept the recommendations of the Pupil Weighting Study and to take action THIS YEAR to change the law which has unjustly battered small, rural towns with smaller schools over the past twenty years.

As I moderated the Twin Valley Unified Union School District Annual Meeting at the elementary school in Wilmington, I watched as no less than seven buckets collected drips from a leaking gym roof. I listened while the Board explained the drastic cuts necessary to try to keep the towns out of the penalty box. Cuts of positions such as a language teacher (the District is down to one teacher of foreign language), economics/business teacher teaching (a very valuable course teaching students everyday life skills such as dealing with mortgages, investments, contracts, etc.) and counselors were necessary in order to avoid the penalty. This is an area where we have consolidated before Act 46 and then were required to consolidate again. Taxes associated with the education property tax have outpaced the ability of our community to cope. Young folks leave for better opportunity across our borders. We fear that the State simply wants to starve us out and for the school to shut down. The Town of Whitingham has a lawsuit that will prove the results you have already received in this study. Your opportunity to change these inequities is upon you, and you must take action now, this year.

As a Selectboard member, I can assure you that shutting down a school is tantamount to killing a community. People move to areas one, where they can work and make a livable wage, two, where there are vibrant schools educating our youth, and three, where the quality of life is enhanced by its natural surroundings--such as Harriman Reservoir, the Green Mountain National Forest, and the Wilmington Trail system. The existing educational funding system has systematically decreased the ability of local folks to stay. Remember, this is a place where adults of all ages from 90 to recent alums show up for soccer and basketball games to share in the community's successes. Keeping a school is necessary to keep the core of the community.

As a student, I can assure you that the course listings, while they sound good, are essentially false advertising because there are not the resources to fund the teaching of the course listings. I am a junior and have nearly completed requirements to graduate and have to take courses at a community college because the high school cannot teach courses such as calculus- a very typical high school course. I started with French, but now take Spanish because there is no French teacher at the school. We watch as schools near the big towns have multiple football teams or track teams when we cannot field both a baseball team and a track team. Why should education funding fund turf fields, multiple teams, and sports facilities, when I cannot take the basic high school and AP course that a high schooler should be able to take? Perhaps education funding should fund the requirements to graduate and let the individual towns fund whatever sports or extra-curricular activities it favors. I'll go to college and I'll be successful. There is great talent in these green mountains, so you should enact these changes to the education funding system in order to keep that talent here.

Therefore, take action on this now. It took twenty years for you to conduct a study that shows the plain truth that the education funding system in effect now is unjust and unconstitutional. Please remember the smaller, rural towns and those Vermonters who live in what might be called the lost kingdom of Vermont.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert Fisher
Sarah Fisher
Finnlay Fisher

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Jeannie Lowell

From: Testimony
Subject: FW: Pupil Weighting Report

From: Patti Dickson <pattid64@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 3:06 PM
To: Testimony <testimony@leg.state.vt.us>
Subject: Pupil Weighting Report

My name is Patricia Dickson from Jamaica. I am a former school board member. I served 6 years on the Jamaica Village board, 6 years on the Leland and Gray board and 1 year on the West River Education District merged board.

I am a parent of a student who went through Jamaica Village School and Leland and Gray. I volunteered on various committees and for the Friends of the Players theater program at Leland and Gray.

Parent participation is integral to some of the most important extra-curricular programs offered at our schools in the West River Valley. Over the duration of my board service many of our elective programs including Consumer Science, Foreign Languages, Music and Art were first picks for the chopping block at budget time. Our student representatives on the board at times could not understand how it was necessary to make cuts to some of their favorite programs. They spoke and wrote eloquently and factually about the benefits of these programs for the student body. With anywhere from 40%-75% of our elementary and high school students qualifying for Free and Reduced Lunch these programs were not something many students could afford to replace with private activity options.

The discussions were painful and at times extremely divisive with over 100 community members and students present ready to fight for the quality educational opportunities they deserved and their tax dollars should allow. These meetings also included, at times, tension filled conversations between school board members. I could not understand how we were always in the same terrible situation with every budget.

There seemed to be no relief! Year after year the board would struggle with the conundrum of how to offer a diverse population of students' quality programming while keeping property taxes from skyrocketing.

To add insult to injury, around 2011 the Agency of Education came up with a punitive devise, ACT 68, to shame school boards to spend less....The Excess Spending Threshold! We managed to stay within the threshold for some years. In time, it was impossible to continue that course. From then on we incurred an additional tax for the amount over the threshold determined by some formula. Thank you...that was very helpful!

Throughout this time Jamaica was struggling with a movement to leave the Windham Central Supervisory Union in order to offer complete school choice to our high school students. Jamaica shares a border with Bondville/Winhall whose students primarily attend a nearby Independent High School with seemingly unlimited donations and endowments that flow like water from a bottomless well. How do we compete with that when we are not providing the correct financial resources to our schools?

One of the expenses most often turned to for instant help prior to cutting programs was cutting infrastructure maintenance expenditures. As a merged district we now have 4 buildings that are from 50+ to 100 years old that need many upgrades and basic maintenance. Our communities should not endure more struggles over choosing building upgrades or educational programs! Enough already!

The above narrative is why I am asking the legislature to:

1. Freeze changes to the education tax financing formula until the Legislature has acted on the recommendations in the Pupil Weighting Factors Report.
2. Add a poverty weight, population density student weight, and a geographic necessary weight to the formula used to calculate equalized pupils, factors recommended in the report.
3. To require the Agency of Education to perform a “look back” at date from 2000 to 2018 and “identify the costs in student outcomes related to inadequate funding through inequitable and inadequate equalized pupil weights”.
4. To require the AOE or Joint Fiscal Office to calculate the “cumulative under –and overtaxing” that resulted from student equalized pupil weighting from 2000-2018.

Our students and our taxpayers are deserving of the much needed restitutions from years of unequal division of Ed Fund dollars. We need to fix our buildings and equalize the educational opportunities our communities have paid for all these years, immediately.

Sincerely,

Patricia Dickson

Jamaica, Vt

Jeannie Lowell

From: John Robohm <john@livewirefarm.com>
Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 3:14 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

As a 25 year flatlander resident of Whitingham, I have watched the quality of education greatly decline since the enactment of Act 60. Because of the low density population and rural nature of our town, the cost of special education and transportation has steadily and consistently driven the cost per pupil into or close to the penalty zone, while driving down the quality of the education offerings. In an attempt to broaden the subject offerings, Whitingham and Wilmington joined school districts, but it didn't resolve the basic problem that "People and NOT Property Pay Taxes." Treating Whitingham as a "rich town" is laughable. The current education laws are grossly unfair to towns like ours where student density is a key ingredient of our total school budget and where local employment opportunities are extremely limited. The current education laws must be scrapped. The Pupil Weighting Factors Report outlines a much better and fair approach to equal education opportunity and must be the foundation for the revised education legislation.

John Robohm

Jacksonville, VT

Jeannie Lowell

From: Kathy & David Larsen <kdlarsen@myfairpoint.net>
Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 2:36 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

March, 2020

I am writing regarding the Pupil Weighting Study and related legislation now under consideration in the Vermont Senate.

I am by no means an expert when it comes to state aid to education. However, since 1986 when I was first elected to the Vermont House of Representatives, I've paid close attention to the assorted state aid formulas and variations thereof that have been considered through the past 34 years.

It is unfortunate that the current state aid formula has not undergone significant changes or even serious consideration since Act 68 which passed 17 years ago.

I believe the best way to honor both the letter and the intent of the Brigham decision is to act now on the Pupil Weighting Study in a manner consistent with that decision. The time has come.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Dave Larsen
Wilmington, VT

- Member, Vermont House of Representatives, 1987-1997
- Member, House Education Committee, 1987-1995 (Vice-chair, 1989-1993; Chair, 1993-1994)
- Member, House Appropriations Committee, 1995-1996 (education budget)
- Member, Vermont State Board of Education, 1999-2003 (Vice -chair, 2000-2001, Chair, 2001-2003)
- Interim Vermont Commissioner of Education, March-November, 2003
- Teacher, Wilmington Middle/High School, 1972-2005

Jeannie Lowell

From: Testimony
Subject: FW: Pupil Weighting Study

From: Michael Boylen <mboylen@marlboro.edu>
Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 1:26 PM
To: Testimony <testimony@leg.state.vt.us>
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

Vermont Senate Education Committee:

Please develop and move legislation following the findings and recommendations of the Pupil Weighting Factors Report so that they apply to FY20. Misapplication of the PWF over the last twenty years has produced grossly unjust limitations and burdens on schools and taxpayers. This has affected both rural and urban Vermont school districts that have high student poverty rates. It has undermined the intent of legislation that was originally supposed to promote statewide equity in education.

The PWFR clearly describes both the misapplication of the student weighting factor and how to appropriately apply it. This issue is clear and specific. It should be addressed now with corrective action by The Legislature. Please don't make stalling excuses. The necessary review of the whole education funding system in Vermont can come later.

Michael Boylen, Marlboro, Vermont



Town of Whitingham
OFFICE OF THE SELECTBOARD

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March 9, 2020

testimony@leg.state.vt.us

Re: Testimony for **Pupil Weighting Study** hearing on March 11, 2020

To Whom it May Concern:

Whitingham is a small rural town south of Route 4; we share a border with Massachusetts. Our 2010 census population count was 1,356. We filed a suit against the State of Vermont on October 27, 2017 alleging that the State is violating Whitingham's students' right to equal educational opportunity and Whitingham's resident taxpayers' right to not be taxed disproportionately.

The recently released Weighting Study has confirmed what our lawsuit is fighting; that since Act 60, many rural and poor students, including in Whitingham, have been denied access to an equitable education.

The proposed changes to the education funding system based on the Weighting Study seem promising to enable Whitingham to provide more education resources for our students and reduce the burden of high property taxes, which is part of the reason the population of Whitingham is declining.

If the changes of this Weighting Study are implemented, our tax rate would be significantly reduced.

The Weighting Study completely undermines and refutes the State of Vermont's argument that the current "per pupil" system is rationally related to the State's interest in providing an equal educational opportunity for all students in Vermont.

Sincerely,

Gig Zboray,
On behalf of the Whitingham Selectboard

Jeannie Lowell

From: Millard Cox <millardcox@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 1:22 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pupil Weighting Factors Report

Thank you for the opportunity to weigh in on this important educational concern.

I am writing to encourage the implementation of the recommendations contained in the *Pupil Weighting Factors Report* issued pursuant to Act 173 of 2018

I wish to make an essential point about public education in Vermont: poverty is the greatest impediment to education that we face. We have so many children growing up in poverty that it is a state and national disgrace. The current estimates are that 18 to 25 percent of children are being raised in poverty, often extreme poverty, in Vermont. It is important to be aware of the fact that our Vermont schools are probably the most positive and supportive factor in the lives of these children. These kids are in school about 6 hours a day, and about 185 days a year. The greatest part of their lives is spent at home, whatever home may consist of.

I wish to make these three main points:

--Poor kids are much less likely to be successful learners because they come to school distressed, angry, filled with anxiety and hopelessness, hungry and often in poor health.

--Standardized achievement scores are as much a reflection of the effects of poverty as they are an indication of a school's efficacy.

--If we as a state and nation want to improve education, we first have to improve life for the kids growing up in poverty.

Thank you again.

Millard Cox
Ripton, Vermont

Jeannie Lowell

From: John Lazelle <johnlazelle@yahoo.com>
Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 11:34 AM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

To Whom it may concern,

Thank you for accepting my testimony.

My name is John Lazelle and live in Wilmington. I am an 8th generation Vermonter and live within 10 miles of where my family first arrived in the State in the mid 1750's. I am 50 years old, married for 22 years, have 4 great children (2 still in high school) and have been employed by the Town of Wilmington since I was a senior in high school. My wife also works full-time as a Surgical Technician at the South Western Vermont Medical Center in Bennington. She is also comes from a family of Vermonters who have been here for many generations.

I am writing to ask you to please use the Pupil Weighting Factor Report that contains revised weighting factors that could drastically lower our education tax rate.

Currently Wilmington has the highest homestead tax rate in the State and the 11th highest non homestead tax rate. Wilmington has the 5th highest education spending per pupil in the State at \$20,153 (FY2018).

These high tax rates are killing our beautiful Town and surrounding Towns. Many, many longtime locals are being forced to sell and leave because they just can't afford the taxes any longer. My wife and I have good jobs and we still have to make sacrifices to pay our bills and stay in our home. We are still paying our mortgage on our house that is valued at \$220,000 and **our taxes are over \$5600! That's \$467 month!**

Our oldest daughter was fortunate enough to buy a very old house from a relative who could no longer afford to keep it, but our middle daughter who is 21, still lives at home because it is so expensive to live in this area and this State. My youngest daughter is a senior in high school and will be attending college in the fall and is not sure she wants to stay in the area after college. My youngest struggles in school and even though he is only 15, he often talks about what he has heard about how expensive it is to live in Wilmington and Vermont.

My point to all of this is that you all need to PLEASE do everything you can to help us. It breaks my heart to see lifelong residents forced to leave their houses that for some been in the family for generations because they can't afford to pay their taxes. And also the next generation sees how hard we are all struggling to survive, why would they want to stay? Act 60 has hurt us so much that I beg you to PLEASE, PLEASE help us and if by at least using the revised pupil weighting study recommendations help, then that is a great place to begin.

Thank you for your time.

Steven "John" Lazelle
Rachel M Lazelle

Jeannie Lowell

From: John Lazelle <johnlazelle@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 11:32 AM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

To Whom it may concern,

Thank you for accepting my testimony.

My name is John Lazelle and live in Wilmington. I am an 8th generation Vermonter and live within 10 miles of where my family first arrived in the State in the mid 1750's. I am 50 years old, married for 22 years, have 4 great children (2 still in high school) and have been employed by the Town of Wilmington since I was a senior in high school. My wife also works full-time as a Surgical Technician at the South Western Vermont Medical Center in Bennington. She is also comes from a family of Vermonters who have been here for many generations.

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Thank you for your time.

Steven "John" Lazelle
Rachel M Lazelle
Wilmington, VT

Jeannie Lowell

From: gail llewellyn <gfllewellyn59@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 10:54 AM
To: Testimony
Subject: PUPIL WEIGHTING STUDY

We are writing to strongly urge you to implement the new Pupil Weighting Study in calculating our local property taxes.

For many many years Wilmington taxpayers have been dealt an unusually heavy burden when compared to other local jurisdictions. This is not fair to our community property owners who have been shouldering the extra costs while benefitting other towns.

We have spoken with numerous people who would like to purchase a home in Wilmington to enjoy and contribute to the Vermont lifestyle. But, they look at the tax rates and choose another place to live instead. At the same time, longtime residents are being priced out of their ability to pay. Inequities in the taxing system have caused Wilmington taxpayers a disproportionate amount in property taxes.

Please redress this issue in order to promote state wide fairness in taxation.

Thank you,
Gail and Craig Llewellyn, Wilmington

Jeannie Lowell

From: Jim Clayton <claytojf@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 10:49 AM
To: Testimony
Cc: John Gannon
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study & Property Tax Inequities/Implications

We are writing in response to the 2019 VT Pupil Weighting Study Report that appears to reveal substantial inequity (and unfairness) in the calculation of local property taxes across towns in the state. We are specifically writing to request that the Senate Committee on Education require the Agency of Education adopt and implement the new pupil weighting factors in the calculation of local property taxes. The 2019 Pupil Weighting Study Report indicates that the inequities have existed for two decades.

The study points to failures within the agency and the Legislature to monitor and assess enacted policies. The result has been to place an undue financial burden on many Vermont communities while benefiting others. My wife and I have been troubled by the high level of property taxes we pay in Wilmington VT, and especially the rate of increase the past few years. From what we are reading, the lack of policy adjustment along the lines indicated the weighting study appears to be a significant reason why. The increases are not sustainable, at least for us and I suspect many others living here.

The proposed new weighting factors take into account population density and poverty variation across towns that result in a more equitable allocation of the tax burden and also give needed relief to towns like Wilmington. We hope that the Senate Committee on Education will strongly support the effort to make this a reality as soon as possible. Doing so will help also help undue, at least partly, the inequities that according to the study have existed for two decades.

Thank you for your attention to this matter of fairness and equity.

Jim and Sue Clayton
Wilmington, VT

Jeannie Lowell

From: Vincent Zito <vzrx27@yahoo.com>
Sent: Tuesday, March 10, 2020 10:44 AM
To: Testimony
Cc: John Gannon; John Widness
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

I am writing this note to support the adoption and implementation of the Pupil Weighting Study by the Agency of Education.

My family has been coming to Vermont for over 40 years to ski and enjoy all that Vermont has to offer year round. We began our love affair with the State by renting a seasonal home in Jamaica, Vermont for 20 years before we decided to build our own piece of paradise in 2003.

We chose to build a home in Wilmington, at Lake Raconda, where we have continued to enjoy the Green Mountain State. According to the article in the Deerfield Valley News, the adoption of the a change in policies which my arise in the recalculation of property taxes in Vermont may result in lower taxes for Vermont residents. My wife and I take special interest at this time, as we are both retired and are putting our house in Connecticut on the market this spring to move to Vermont and make it our permanent residence.

We are both in favor of any legislation that would equalize the tax burden distribution amongst all existing and future residents of Vermont. Not only could the Pupil Weighting Study make the taxing burden more fair, but it could also help to encourage others (retired or not) to move to Vermont to raise their families.

Thank you for considering all options of the Study .

Vincent and Elizabeth Zito

Jeannie Lowell

From: Lauren MacArthur <laurenbmac@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, March 9, 2020 8:23 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pupil Weighting System

Dear Representative,

I am writing with a great deal of concern, something that many of my neighbors and friends are also feeling, about the unfair pupil weighting system that is now penalizing our town (Marlboro) and its residents heavily. We are also concerned for neighboring towns, such as Brattleboro, towns that are struggling more acutely with poverty and opioid addiction, and have this unwieldy system taking away energy and money from where it's needed most.

Our school is in dire need of physical repair, with water dripping in through the ceiling every time it rains, and yet we must pay a penalty fee for passing a budget that meets the educational needs of our students and the requirements of the state. It does not make sense.

For all that we have gone through in the name of equalizing opportunities in education throughout the state, this antiquated system does not make sense and only creates more inequity. Please don't put this off any longer. It's time for a change to this unacceptable system.

Thank you,
Lauren MacArthur
Marlboro, VT

Jeannie Lowell

From: Lauren Poster <laurenolitskiposter@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, March 9, 2020 4:39 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

Dear Legislators,

As a former School Board Member for the Marlboro School District, I am beyond dismayed that the implementation based on findings from the Pupil Weighting Study that was conducted at the direction the legislature may be delayed! For what reason? We have been assessed a per student spending amount that was based on flawed information for almost 20 years!!

During that time our town has put off many much needed repairs to our building and emptied our reserve funds in an effort to not overburden our tax payers. All the while it seems our student weighting formula was wrong. We are at the bottom of the barrel. When ACT 46 put our district in jeopardy of losing our JR High we put off a feasibility study that had been in the works to address issues with our facility as well as considerations of adding Pre-K. We didn't know what would happen to our Junior High, so we had to wait until that work was done. We now have added a pre-K and would like to do an addition to house the many students in that age group. We have a building that is beyond capacity, and have had to tuition some of our Pre-K because we don't have the space to house them. We have a roof so beyond repair that there are buckets in classrooms that fill up every time it rains. The construction work has been postponed again because we are now being assessed a penalty for going over the spending threshold. This is outrageous! Completely unfair!

The inequitable weighting system needs to be corrected immediately!

And the penalty fee for this year should be removed as it is based on 20 years of inaccurate assessing of our Per Pupil costs.

I trust you to be fair and just.

Most Sincerely,

Lauren Poster
Past School Board Director
Serving for 12 years

Jeannie Lowell

From: Brenda Kennedy <bkennedy854@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, March 9, 2020 3:44 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: Weighing Study

According to the Pupil Weighting Factors Report, it was found that for more than 20 years, Vermont's smaller towns have been overtaxed and their schools underfunded. Among its findings: Vermont's education funding formula has led to inequities for some of the state's most vulnerable children.

According to Acts 46 & 173, the framework for these Acts was to create equity amongst districts to be able to offer more educational opportunities for students. According to the finding in the weighting study, only certain districts will ever be able to achieve this with an inequitable funding structure. This is only hurting our students who reside in communities with more than 50% who qualify for free/reduced school food programs, rural communities and ELA students. By not acting upon these findings with urgency is only continuing to leave the tax burden on poorer districts and limiting opportunities for students. Especially when schools, boards, administrators and teachers are scrambling to understand and restructure or cut programming to meet the new financial restrictions imposed by Act 173.

I urge you to push these findings to the forefront this legislative session, and make the necessary changes to the funding structure to provide relief to taxpayers, and opportunities to our States students. Thank you,

Brenda Kennedy
Marlboro resident

Jeannie Lowell

From: Carol Scott <scottwc87@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, March 9, 2020 3:04 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: Weighting Study

As a parent and tax payer in Marlboro I urge you to begin implementing the the results of the weighting study immediately with no further delay.

This would help both meet the needs of our students and reduce the ever increasing tax burden of our very small population, which is crushing.

Please move forward.

Carol Scott

Jeannie Lowell

From: Lissa Harris <lissa.harris@outlook.com>
Sent: Monday, March 9, 2020 12:34 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: Student weighting

Submitted for testimony:

Dear Legislators,

2 years ago I moved to VT with my husband and my 2 children, ages 7 and 8.

One of our primary reasons for moving was so that my children could experience learning apart from the high-stakes testing atmosphere that was ramping up in New York.

I found true education for my children at Marlboro School.

But while my children are receiving the high quality education I was looking for, their school building is falling down around them. In one of my child's classroom the roof is leaking a galloon of water and day. And my other child's spanish class is held in a closet because there is not enough available space in the school for a proper classroom.

Was this the price I had to pay for the type of education I was looking for?

When I found out earlier this year, that the way our school was funded was responsible for our lack of available funds to address these crucial infrastructure problems I was livid.

I'm angry that any student would have to risk their health, sitting in a potentially toxic mold environment because the state of Vermont hasn't addressed this funding inequity for 20 years. That's something NY would do, not VT.

Shame on all of you for allowing this to continue and shame on you for exposing children to unsafe buildings. Maybe it's time for us to move back to NY.

Angrily,
Lissa Harris

Jeannie Lowell

From: Testimony
Subject: FW: Pupil Weighting Factors Report

From: Lucy Gratwick <gratwick@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, March 9, 2020 11:42 AM
To: Testimony <testimony@leg.state.vt.us>
Subject: Pupil Weighting Factors Report

Dear Senate Committee Members

As clearly laid out in the 2019 Pupil Weighting Factors Report, the antiquated weighting system has been penalizing many small towns like Marlboro, and larger ones like Brattleboro and Bennington for years, yet you still refuse to address the inequalities because it might raise the taxes in districts that have benefited from this system for the past 20 years. This is totally unacceptable and unfair. The Pupil Weighting Factors Report is comprehensive, conclusive and clear. Vermont's Secretary of Education Dan French testified that the report shows "... immediate action by the General Assembly is necessary to address a significant equity concern in the current education funding system." Please do your job and make the necessary changes immediately.

Lucy Gratwick

Marlboro,Vt.

Jeannie Lowell

From: Jeff Bower <jeff.bower.vt@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, March 9, 2020 10:58 AM
To: Douglas Korb
Cc: Ann Cummings; Mark MacDonald; Michael Sirotkin; Brian Campion; Becca Balint; Randy Brock; Christopher Pearson; Faith Brown; Ruth Hardy; James McNeil; Corey Parent; Andrew Perchlik; Debbie Ingram; Avery Lamb; Kate Webb; Larry Cupoli; Peter Conlon; Sarita Austin; Lynn Batchelor; Caleb Elder; Dylan Giambatista; Kathleen James; Laura Sibia; Kelly Pajala; Sara Coffey; Emilie Kornheiser; Mollie Burke; Tristan Toleno; Carolyn Partridge; Matthew Trieber; Nader Hashim; Mike Mrowicki; Emily Long; John Gannon; Testimony; Jay Hooper; Christopher Mattos; Casey Toof; Janet Ancel; William Canfield; Johannah Donovan; Peter Anthony; Scott Beck; Patrick Brennan; Cynthia Browning; Jim Masland; Robin Scheu; George Till; Sam Young
Subject: Fix the education weighting system THIS TERM

Wow. Learning more about how our tiny town of 1,000 people - with a per capita income of \$19,500, and 19% of our population under 18 and 10% over 65, - is paying a \$200,000 'penalty' to the state which will benefit other school districts while our local school is literally losing staff and delaying long-needed repairs. I am grateful for the work you are doing as citizen legislators but this is nothing short of robbery. As Martin Luther King Jr said - "We have socialism for the rich, and rugged individualism for everyone else."

Keep this money in our small towns and do something THIS TERM about acting on this weighting system. Delaying action further is downright criminal. None of the phasing - there's been two decades to address this.

My suggestion to our town is - if the state fails to act on this during this term - if we send the additional \$200k to Montpelier it's gross financial negligence on our behalf.

Jeff Bower, Marlboro

Jeannie Lowell

From: Megan <mml.wellness@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, March 9, 2020 10:04 AM
To: Littlehales Megan
Subject: Pupil Weighting System

Dear Vermont Legislator,

I live in the town of Marlboro, and I am outraged about the significant education tax increase I am facing! How long has this antiquated pupil weighting system been penalizing towns like Marlboro? Our school has deferred maintenance for many years, in order to keep our taxes at a reasonable level, all while struggling with this inane system of pupil weighting. This has to be changed, and it has to be changed now. Do not avoid this, in fear of raising taxes in other towns that have only been benefiting for these many years! And in addition, we would like you to waive the penalty that is causing this major tax change, so that we can all continue with our lives, support our school in an equitable fashion, and be able to afford living in this town! Do your job!

Thank you,

Megan MacArthur Littlehales
Lady Moon
Reiki and Massage for All Beings
ladymoonreiki.blogspot.com

Jeannie Lowell

From: Adrien Helm <adriehelm@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, March 9, 2020 9:48 AM
To: Testimony
Subject: Correct student weighting factors

I am a willing education and property tax payer on a second home in the Northeast Kingdom. Please do the right thing and correct inequitable weights and address the negative effects for districts that have been able to over access state resources in order to achieve your statutory goals of equitable funding for all Vermont students regardless of residency and special needs.

Thank you,
Adrien Helm
Barton, Vermont

Jeannie Lowell

From: Kenneth McFadden <kmcfadden@windhamcentralboard.org>
Sent: Monday, March 9, 2020 9:25 AM
To: Testimony

To whom it may concern,

If you seriously want to address the any quality of education in Vermont. You must look at weighting factors of budget inequalities. It will level the playing field for budgeting for our students. But most importantly it's just overdue commonsense . If it cost you three times as much just to get the child to school. You're already starting out behind all the other budgets. Do you take away from the child's education, or do you weigh this factor and others into the equation.

As I said earlier " this is overdue common sense " .

Respectfully submitted, Kenneth G. McFadden

Jeannie Lowell

From: Angela Mousseau <amousseau@marlboroschool.net>
Sent: Sunday, March 8, 2020 11:33 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: My Call for Immediate Action

As a taxpayer, a mother of two Marlboro Elementary School children and one of the school bus drivers, I am demanding that the VT Legislature take immediate action. The findings of the recent Pupil Weighting Factors Report are appalling and shed light on the reasons that our school has been unable to fund the much needed repairs to our building, as well as keep all of the incredible programming and staff ratios, as our school population continues to grow and our taxes go up. There is literally a giant hole in the ceiling and when it rains, water pours into buckets placed in the middle of a classroom.

If the Legislature does not implement the weights this year, then my children along with so many others, are continuing to be marginalized and penalized. There is no sane reason to 'go slow'. The data speaks volumes and the need for immediate relief is clear. Our towns, our schools and our children are suffering. For 20 years, the implementation of an unfair and unequal system has been disastrous. We have all known that there was a problem and now we know why. Stop it now! You have the power, the knowledge and the solution in your hands!

I vote, I participate and I pay my taxes. Fix this, please!
Angela L. Mousseau

Jeannie Lowell

From: Testimony
Subject: FW: PUPIL WEIGHTING STUDY

From: carol ann lobo johnson <clobjohnson@gmail.com>
Sent: Sunday, March 8, 2020 9:46 PM
To: Testimony <testimony@leg.state.vt.us>
Subject: PUPIL WEIGHTING STUDY

Carol Ann Johnson
Marlboro, VT 05344

March 8, 2020

Vermont State Legislature
Vermont State House
115 State St
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

Dear Legislators

I am writing to you as a parent, a tax payer, a concerned citizen looking for fairness and responsiveness on the part of the legislature to assist school children and tax payers alike, and a past school board member of Marlboro Elementary School.

I wish to express my dismay, outrage and **contempt for the current education funding system**. Going back to Act 60 (1997) we were supposed to see equity in how schools received funding. Then there was Act 68 in 2004. And then in 2010 we got Act 130. All of these were designed to resolve issues of taxpayer equity and disparities in per-pupil spending. And then you gave us Act 46. And while Act 46 wasn't about equity, it was a ridiculous waste of time that might never have been forced upon us if proper weighting of students were considered from the beginning. We could have potentially solved so many challenges, or written grants or been paid at other jobs if we hadn't wasted months and months of our precious time on meetings tearing our hair out of what to do with Act 46. None of these Acts have worked at bringing equity to children, teachers or taxpayers because no one took the time to consider socio-economic differences of children, their home life and their towns' economic opportunities, or rather the lack of opportunities.

For over 20 years, a complete generation of students, have been robbed of a fair education system and our taxes have gone up and up and up. And I can tell you how hard the Marlboro School Board and principal work year after year to get the budget down . Every year we have to make cuts. Every year we have to put off a new roof and now it's falling in. Literally. And now, our taxes are poised to go up 30% because of the ridiculous arbitrary threshold that is stipulated. Meanwhile, our student teacher ratios are getting better and better, we have more school children and less teachers. How can our taxes go up? **Because our students' families are getting poorer and poorer every year and it costs more to educate children from poor homes where parents are working multiple jobs---where mom isn't**

waiting in the kitchen to help with their homework. Mom is working her second job just when kids are getting home. Kids come to school hungry and scared. The trauma kids experience in some communities is greatly impacting the school environment and requiring more and more counseling for example. This counseling and in-school meals, and all the other services that go with attending to the needs of poor children is costly and necessary. And the tax payers of small rural towns or towns like Brattleboro that have been so gravely impacted by the opioid crisis are having to pay more and more because the state has not sent us our fair share of revenue.

The new weighting study and the resulting revenue reallocation needs to be implemented immediately, none of this phasing-in nonsense. The towns that have been receiving more than their fair share (that have been able to put on additions and add music programs or whatever) have had their day in the sun. It's time for poor rural communities and those impacted by social unease to get their fair share NOW and come out from the shadows.

It's not just the lack of proper equity of funds from the state that have been impacting local tax payers. It's that schools are required to provide so many services that are not even education based, and schools are not reimbursed for the actual costs of these services. For example, schools are required to provide so many services for special needs students. And I DO NOT begrudge the services, it's that we don't get enough funding for them....whether it's transportation, student-teacher ratios, testing, equipment, occupational therapy, physical therapy, language therapy, etc. Rather than running for President, maybe Bernie could go to bat for us property tax payers and get the federal govt to pay for what it's requiring of us. Same goes for Welch and Leahy. We can't afford to pay for health insurance for everyone in our school building either. Once again, how is it that insurance became an education item? **My suggestion is that all of these non-education items** (add to the list---nurses, lunches, snacks, social workers, counselors, vaccinations, etc.) **be funded by the state under Health and Human Services. And the state needs to find a new revenue stream to pay** for all of this. It can't be paid for out of our local property taxes. It's killing us.

My taxes are going to go up to over \$8,000 a year for a ranch that was built in 1968. That's ridiculous and a hardship, especially when you are retired. I will move to DE and get a new house and pay \$3,000 a year in taxes. And I am not alone. It isn't just young people leaving or not arriving in VT that's the problem. You have soon-to-be -retired people like me saying...."hmmm life down south is looking pretty nice, not just the weather, but the lack of taxes, too."

Once again, I respectfully request that the new weighting study and reallocation of funding be implemented immediately.

Sincerely,
Carol Ann Johnson
clobojohnson@gmail.com

--
clobojohnson@gmail.com

Jeannie Lowell

From: Catharine Hamilton <river.ratcat@gmail.com>
Sent: Sunday, March 8, 2020 9:17 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: weighing system

To whom it may concern,

I am a resident of Marlboro Vermont. We learned at our recent town meeting that there is concern regarding equity in our current education funding system, or more specifically the weighting system used for calculations. It was brought to our attention that the weighting system has been unjustly calculated for many years and has resulted in a huge penalty for our school, which will have a significant impact on our taxes. A study was completed and the AOE supports the recommendations. Why then has it not been implemented?!? Stop penalizing schools and ultimately their students by over taxing. It seems our state government has failed to monitor and assess student weighting with fairness. Furthermore, I am angry about this issue because the school building, like many in the state, desperately needs repairs. The penalty means that we have been putting off badly needed repairs to the building. If this issue had been addressed in a much more timely manner, we could have potentially approved money for those repairs if it weren't for the penalty.

The State of Vermont has been working at getting more young people to stay in Vermont or attract young people to Vermont to counter act our aging population. Your inaction regarding the weighting system will work against this goal. Stop offering incentives (ridiculous!) and fix the weighting problem. Stop passing the buck and act.

Respectfully,

Catharine Hamilton

Jeannie Lowell

From: Paul Scudato <paulscudato@me.com>
Sent: Sunday, March 8, 2020 3:47 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: VT Pupil Weighting Study

I support the Senate Committee on Education to require the Agency of Education to implement the new pupil weighting factors in the calculation of local property taxes. In the 2019 Pupil Weighting Study Report unfairness of the current model was demonstrated.

The proposed factors that consider population density and poverty would result in a more fair allocation of the tax burden.

Paul Scudato and Cindy Scudato, Wilmington VT

March 8, 2020

Dear Legislators,

As residents of Marlboro, VT and therefore part of the Marlboro school district, we believe the the 2019 Pupil Weighting Study clearly demonstrates that the Education Taxes throughout the state have been arbitrary and unjustly calculated for too long.

We are asking that the penalty fee be removed from the Education Tax burden for this year. Let's be fair. Our taxes are high enough already. Thank you.

Matthew and Lucy Tell

March 7, 2020

To: Members of the House Education and Ways and Means Committees

From: Pieter van Loon and Rachel Boyden

Re: Pupil Weighting Study and H-909 and H-910

Dear Members of the House Education and Ways and Means Committees,

When we heard that the tax rate in Marlboro was going to go up by 18% due to the school budget, we were incensed that the school board could do that to the people in this town. When we educated ourselves and found that the driver for this increase was not lavish spending by the school board, but rather a number of things beyond their control, our indignation found a new target, the VT Legislature.

By far the most galling part of the outrageous increase in taxes that all Marlboro taxpayers will have to endure, if they can, is the fact that it is largely due to a faulty Pupil Weighting System that the legislature has not been monitoring and adjusting to ensure equity. The 2019 Pupil Weighting Study shows that the formula used to establish state-wide Education Taxes has been irrationally calculated for well over a decade. If you are unclear what we mean by that, we point you to page 4 of the Executive Summary of the Pupil Weighting Study which includes this statement:

The cost factors incorporated in the calculation do not reflect current educational circumstance. ... Neither the factors considered by the formula nor the value of the weights reflect contemporary educational circumstances and costs.

And if that isn't galling enough, the bullet point below that one is even more exasperating:

The values for the existing weights have weak ties, if any, with evidence describing differences in the costs for educating students with disparate needs or operating schools in different contexts.

Weak ties, if any, to evidence... Wow.

As a result of this baseless assessment, Marlboro School District taxpayers are being assessed a penalty of more than \$200,000 for the coming property tax year. Our part in this will be in excess of \$1,000 and turns our tax bill from a painful inevitability to an excruciating burden. We shudder to think what it will do to the folks in town who, like many Vermonters who are in districts suffering under the existing system, are land rich and cash poor.

A side effect of this inequity has been the insult to injury of our not being able to fund badly needed repairs to our school. The roof leaks in one of the upper classrooms and the school board was ready to propose a significant improvement project to address the problem but had to hold off due to this ridiculous inequity. Now kids in the 5th/6th room next year will again have to deploy buckets when it rains.

It is imperative that the Legislature implement the recommendations of the 2019 Pupil Weighting Study Report in 2020 to start to make amends for the burdens it has placed upon taxpayers of our town — along with many others throughout the State — for decades. Only then will you begin to atone for the legislative oversight failure that is imperiling our students' rights to a safe, secure, equitable education and relieve our taxpayers from the undue burden they have been carrying for many years. In addition, the \$200,000 penalty assessed as a result of applying a Pupil Weighting system that is outdated and without basis in fact must be waived. Not to do so in light of the findings of the Pupil Weighting Study would be unconscionable.

Many Vermont towns are in the same boat as Marlboro. As elected leaders in the legislature, it is your duty to pursue fairness in education funding and as citizens of VT, we are sure it is something you wholeheartedly support. There are no doubt people on the committee who live in towns in which a change would bring about an increase in taxes. Although this puts you in a difficult spot, it also provides you with a chance to show true courage and leadership by righting a wrong that has been in place for far too long. Please do not miss this opportunity. Vote to implement the Study recommendations and eliminate unjust Education Tax penalties before the end of this session.

Thank you for your time and service,
Pieter van Loon and Rachel Boyden
Marlboro, VT
boydenvl@myfairpoint.net

Jeannie Lowell

From: Gail MacArthur <macarthur.gail@gmail.com>
Sent: Saturday, March 7, 2020 5:10 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

I am writing to request that the changes identified in the 2019 Pupil Weighting study be implemented immediately. For 20 years, our school has done without needed capital improvements because of the high taxes which the unfair weighting of pupils has caused. The purpose of Act 60 was to equalize educational opportunities across districts, and due to the legislatures' omission of examining and updating districts needs many schools have had taxes rise and have had to do without needed improvements and expanded educational opportunities.

Adjusting the distribution of funds will not cost the state anything in more revenue. It will only involve a redistribution of the funds already generated.

Sincerely,
Gail MacArthur, Marlboro

Jeannie Lowell

From: Testimony
Subject: FW: Pupil Weighting Study

From: tom.laughlin@att.net <tom.laughlin@att.net>
Sent: Saturday, March 7, 2020 2:12 PM
To: Testimony <testimony@leg.state.vt.us>
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

I am writing to strongly urge the Senate Committee on Education to require the Agency of Education to adopt and implement the new pupil weighting factors in the calculation of local property taxes. In the 2019 Pupil Weighting Study Report the inequities that have existed for two decades, and the failure of the Agency of Education and Legislature to recognize, analyze, and rectify these inequalities were very evident.

The proposed new weighting factors that take into account population density and poverty would result in a much more equitable allocation of the tax burden and provide some much needed relief to towns like Wilmington. I hope that the Senate Committee on Education will strongly support the effort to make this a reality as soon as possible. Doing so will help make amends for the burden that this inequality has placed upon Vermont taxpayers for the past many years.

Sincerely,

Thomas M. Laughlin

Wilmington, VT 05363

Jeannie Lowell

From: Testimony
Subject: FW: Change the Weighting formula: Testimony in favor

-----Original Message-----

From: Linnie Jones <linniejones108@gmail.com>
Sent: Saturday, March 7, 2020 5:48 PM
To: Testimony <testimony@leg.state.vt.us>
Cc: Mike Mrowicki <MMrowicki@leg.state.vt.us>; Nader Hashim <NHashim@leg.state.vt.us>
Subject: Change the Weighting formula: Testimony in favor

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing regarding the “weighting” formula used to determine equalized pupil counts. I urge you to adopt a formula that reflects the actual costs.

The actual cost factors were identified in the recently commissioned legislative study. This is the fairest way to assess taxes in Vermont.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Linnie Jones and Akara Draper

East Dummerston, VT 05346

Jeannie Lowell

From: Widness, John <john-widness@uiowa.edu>
Sent: Saturday, March 7, 2020 12:16 PM
To: Testimony
Cc: John Gannon
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

I am writing to strongly urge the Senate Committee on Education to require the Agency of Education to adopt and implement the new pupil weighting factors in the calculation of local property taxes. In the 2019 Pupil Weighting Study Report the inequities that have existed for two decades, and the failure of the Agency of Education and Legislature to recognize, analyze, and rectify these inequalities were at last laid bare for all to see.

The weighting study clearly point to failures within the agency and the Legislature to monitor and assess enacted policies. These failures have place an undue financial burden on many Vermont communities while benefiting others. As residents of Wilmington, my wife and I have been shocked by the property taxes assessed on our home as a downstream result of Vermont's existing pupil weighting factors in the calculation of local property taxes. It thus appears that without some intervention on the part of the legislature, our taxes will continue to increase to help make up the shortfall.

The proposed new weighting factors that take into account population density and poverty would result in a much more equitable allocation of the tax burden and provide some much needed relief to towns like Wilmington. I hope that the Senate Committee on Education will strongly support the effort to make this a reality as soon as possible. Doing so will help make amends for the burdens this inequality has placed upon Vermont taxpayers for the past two decades.

Thank you for your *timely* attention and consideration of having a hard look at the Pupil Weighting Study.

John ("Jack") A. Widness

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Jeannie Lowell

From: Testimony
Subject: FW: Pupil Weighting Study

From: Susan Johnson <susancooke1947@gmail.com>
Sent: Saturday, March 7, 2020 11:18 AM
To: Testimony <testimony@leg.state.vt.us>
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

The 2019 Pupil Weighting Factors Report confirmed what we in Whitingham and townspeople of the Deerfield Valley have known from the beginning; Act 60 (and subsequent changes to the law) does not benefit our schools, children, residents or community.

I urge the legislature to act immediately to correct the inequities that have plagued small school and taxpayers for two decades. This is no time to take baby steps. The continued viability of Whitingham rests on good schools and a fair tax base.

My husband, Tom, and I have lived in Jacksonville, a village of the town of Whitingham, for 45 years. Both of our sons graduated from Whitingham School in the late 1990s and moved out-of-state for work. Tom and I continue each year to support the school budget but in our retirement to do so has become an increasing hardship.

Yours truly,
Susan Cooke Johnson

Jeannie Lowell

From: Phil Edelstein <phil_edelstein@yahoo.com>
Sent: Friday, March 6, 2020 1:31 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: Fw: Pupil Weighting Study

The Vermont "per pupil" education funding system has caused great harm to Whitingham students by forcing Whitingham schools to provide an inferior education compared to large schools. The current "per pupil" education funding system has caused great financial harm to Whitingham taxpayers, reducing the quality of life in Whitingham and reducing the value of all property in Whitingham.

The proposed changes to the education funding system based on the Weighting Study will enable Whitingham to provide more education resources for our students and reduce the burden of high property taxes which is part of the reason the population of Whitingham is declining. The Weighting Study completely undermines and refutes the State of Vermont's argument that the current "per pupil" system is rationally related to the State of Vermont interest in providing an equal educational opportunity for all students in Vermont.

I support the use of the Weighting Study to change the Vermont education funding system

Philip Edelstein
Whitingham Vermont

Jeannie Lowell

From: Testimony
Subject: FW: Pupil Weighting Study

From: Wendy James <wspina@gmail.com>
Sent: Friday, March 6, 2020 11:44 AM
To: Testimony <testimony@leg.state.vt.us>
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

Dear Legislators,

I'm writing to urge you to pass legislation addressing the pupil weighting inequities, as outlined in the recent study, as soon as possible. We, in Wilmington, have functioned under unfair funding guidelines and scanty course offerings for close to twenty years, and our students should not wait any longer to have the situation rectified.

For the 2020 school year, our Twin Valley school board was forced to eliminate a Business teacher position (hence, no Business classes) and one foreign language offering (leaving only one language choice) in the Middle/High School.

This is extremely unfair to our students.

Again, please address this urgent problem.

Sincerely,

Wendy James
Wilmington, VT 05363

March 5, 2020

To Whom It May Concern,

At the behest of the voters of the Marlboro School District we submit the following:

The 2019 Pupil Weighting Study demonstrates that the Education Taxes throughout the State have been arbitrarily and unjustly calculated for well over a decade.

This year the Marlboro School District's taxpayers are being assessed a penalty of more than \$200,000 because our school budget exceeds the spending caps that have been placed upon it by the flawed, inequitable weighting system.

Therefore, rather than add this insult to the many years of injury, the voters of the Marlboro School District petition that the penalty fee be removed from their Education Tax burden for this year. Thank you.

Marlboro Select Board

Jesse Kreitzer, Chair

Julia Von Ranson,

Aaron Betts

Marlboro Town Clerk

Forrest Holzapfel

Marlboro School District Directors

Douglas Korb, Chair

Daniel MacArthur, Vice Chair

Lissa Harris, Clerk

Celena Romo, Director

David Holzapfel, Director

Jeannie Lowell

From: Ali Edelstein <kedpied2@yahoo.com>
Sent: Friday, March 6, 2020 10:23 AM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

The Vermont "per pupil" education funding system has caused great harm to Whitingham students by forcing Whitingham schools to provide an inferior education compared to large schools. The current "per pupil" education funding system has caused great financial harm to Whitingham taxpayers, reducing the quality of life in Whitingham and reducing the value of all property in Whitingham.

The proposed changes to the education funding system based on the Weighting Study will enable Whitingham to provide more education resources for our students and reduce the burden of high property taxes which is part of the reason the population of Whitingham is declining. The Weighting Study completely undermines and refutes the State of Vermont's argument that the current "per pupil" system is rationally related to the State of Vermont interest in providing an equal educational opportunity for all students in Vermont.

I support the use of the Weighting Study to change the Vermont education funding system

Alice Edelstein
Whitingham Vermont

Jeannie Lowell

From: Bettina Krampetz <normpetz@sover.net>
Sent: Friday, March 6, 2020 9:34 AM
To: Testimony
Subject: pupil weigting study

As an elderly retiree on limited income in a rural community in Southern Vermont (Wilmington), I see amending S.46 to require study by the Agency of Education and recommendations to the legislature on implementing the Pupil Weighing Factor Report as imperative. New Weighting Factors should bring substantial benefits to the rural communities where so many struggle with their property taxes.

Thank you, Bettina Krampetz

Jeannie Lowell

From: Testimony
Subject: FW: equitable education

From: Cathy Osman <cosman@marlboro.edu>
Sent: Friday, March 6, 2020 9:15 AM
To: Testimony <testimony@leg.state.vt.us>
Subject: equitable education

To all legislators in Vermont,

I wish to call your attention to a long-term inequity in the way need is determined in revenue sharing for schools in Vermont. In the view of many here in the town of Marlboro, the weighing system had been unfairly skewed away from small rural place like Marlboro, causing us to raise very high school taxes some of which has gone to benefit less needy towns. **Please, with all haste, fix the weighing system to more equitable and give some relief to over burdened small towns across the state. The very existence of our school is in the balance.**

Cathy Osman

Marlboro, VT
05344

Jeannie Lowell

From: Testimony
Subject: FW: Weighting System for school Funding

From: Timothy Segar <tsegar@marlboro.edu>
Sent: Friday, March 6, 2020 9:04 AM
To: Testimony <testimony@leg.state.vt.us>
Subject: Weighting System for school Funding

To all legislators in Vermont,

I wish to call your attention to a long-term inequity in the way need is determined in revenue sharing for schools in Vermont. In the view of many here in the town of Marlboro, the weighing system had been unfairly skewed away from small rural place like Marlboro, causing us to raise very high school taxes some of which has gone to benefit less needy towns. **Please, with all haste, fix the weighing system to more equitable and give some relief to over burdened small towns across the state. The very existence of our school is in the balance.**

Timothy J. Segar

Marlboro, VT
05344
tsegar@marlboro.edu

Jeannie Lowell

From: Diane Chapman <medbury@hotmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, March 5, 2020 1:01 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

To whom it may concern:

We are residents of Wilmington, Vermont and have lived in Wilmington for over 40 years. Our children attended school here and we have seen many changes in both the education and taxation in our area through the years.

We heard Rep. John Gannon speak at town meeting regarding the Pupil Weighting Factor Report and we urge the legislature to implement these new weighting factors. After 20 years of being burdened with such high taxes, it would be a relief to see that per pupil spending was equitable throughout the state.

We would attend in person for the public hearing next Wednesday but will be away.

Thank you for your consideration.

Diane and Leonard Chapman

Jeannie Lowell

From: Rhea Clark <jrbclark@hotmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, March 4, 2020 2:20 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pupil weighing study

I strongly urge the Senate Committee on Education to amend S.46 to require the Agency of Education to recommend to the Legislature on how to Implement the Pupil Weighing Factors Report. I believe this is a critical step towards a much fairer formula for the taxation of education in Vermont. The current system does not work for all the towns in Vermont.

Sent from my iPad

Jeannie Lowell

From: Testimony
Subject: FW: Pupil Weighting Study

From: Doug Frugé <djfruge@comcast.net>
Sent: Wednesday, March 4, 2020 11:37 AM
To: Testimony <testimony@leg.state.vt.us>
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

I would like to request that the Senate Amend S.46 to require the Agency of Education to study and recommend to the Legislature how to implement new weighting factors recommended in the *Pupil Weighting Factors Report* that was completed by the Agency and posted on December 24, 2019. That report recommended new weighting factors for enrollment and pupil density, with increased weighting for poverty and English Language Learners. I am in support of implementing these revised weighting factors for determining funding allocation to school districts.

Thank you for considering my views on this.

Doug Frugé

Whitingham, VT 05361

Jeannie Lowell

From: Testimony
Subject: FW: Pupil weighing study

-----Original Message-----

From: Ann Coleman <artistanncoleman@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, March 3, 2020 4:51 PM
To: Testimony <testimony@leg.state.vt.us>
Subject: Pupil weighing study

I am glad to learn that the research recommends new weighting factors for enrollment and population density and increased weight for factors on poverty in English language learners. It only makes sense to provide more funding where there is a higher percentage of need. To do otherwise would be grossly unfair and unconstitutional. For the past two decades the allocation of education funds in the state of Vermont has been grossly unfair. I trust this governing body to do what is fair in the interest of all children in our school systems. Please do not waste anymore time and dollars with studies. The multiple pending lawsuits you will insue if this is not dealt with in a just manner will waste even more time money and energy if this is not resolved equitably and swiftly.

Respectfully yours,
Ann Coleman-Specht

Full time resident and tax payer @
Whitingham Vermont

Sent from my iPhone

Jeannie Lowell

From: Joyce Forbush <j4bush@comcast.net>
Sent: Tuesday, March 3, 2020 4:09 PM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pupil weighting study

My name is Joyce Forbush and I am a resident of Whitingham. My family is in favor of a more equitable costing out of education costs. Our area is rural and poor.

My son and his wife had a new baby less than a year ago and we would like to see them be able to afford to stay here in Whitingham and educate our granddaughter. If the cost of education continues to lead to higher property taxes, they may not be able to. Nor will a rural life style be inviting to them if the education system is poor.

I urge you to implement the " pupil weighting factors report".

Respectfully,

Joyce C. Forbush

"We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools."

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Jeannie Lowell

From: ptiff <ptiff123@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, March 4, 2020 11:14 AM
To: ptiff
Cc: dkorb@windhamcentralboard.org; cromo@windhamcentralboard.org; dholzapfel@windhamcentralboard.org; lharris@windhamcentralboard.org; Dan MacArthur
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

To whom it may concern,

I am a resident of Marlboro, Vermont and I am outraged by the pupil weighting "system" that you are using to determine education tax rates. Because of your extremely unfair process, my education tax is going up 9% this year. That is untenable.

The conclusions revealed by the Weighting Study clearly point to gross failures within the Agency and the Legislature to monitor and assess enacted policies which place an undue financial burden on many Vermont communities while benefiting others. This inequality is unconscionable. That our state leaders have allowed this to happen through their inattention, year after year, is unacceptable.

I insist that the Legislature implement the recommendations of the 2019 Pupil Weighting Study Report immediately in order to make amends for the burdens it has inequitably placed upon taxpayers for decades. Though a failure of omission rather than commission, the financial hardship to the taxpayers has been the same regardless. This immediate correction will assist our town — along with many others throughout the State — in protecting our students' rights to a safe and secure place of learning while relieving our taxpayers from the undue burden of legislative oversight failure.

Sincerely,
Margaret Tiffany

Jeannie Lowell

From: Michaelanne Widness <mwidness@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, March 4, 2020 9:24 AM
To: Testimony
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

I am writing to urge the Senate Committee on Education to require the Agency of Education to adopt and implement the new pupil weighting factors in the calculation of local property taxes.

My husband and I moved to Wilmington, Vermont 5 years ago from Iowa. We were shocked, frankly, at the property taxes assessed on our home. In Iowa we lived in Iowa City near the University of Iowa in a 3 story Victorian house listed on the National Register of Historic Places. We had a double lot and enjoyed the full array of municipal services. Our taxes in Wilmington (we live on a dirt road 3 miles outside of town) started out at almost twice what we were paying before the move, and they've increased every year since. The bankruptcy of a local ski resort has depressed and will continue to depress the area economically, and it appears that without some intervention on the part of the legislature, our taxes will continue to increase to help make up the shortfall.

The proposed new weighting factors that take into account population density and poverty would result in a much more equitable allocation of the tax burden and provide some much needed relief to towns like Wilmington. I hope you will support the effort to make this a reality.

Thank you for your consideration.

Michaelanne Widness

Jeannie Lowell

From: Testimony
Subject: FW: Pupil Weighting Study

-----Original Message-----

From: Claudette Hollenbeck <overthehill614@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, March 4, 2020 9:00 AM
To: Testimony <testimony@leg.state.vt.us>
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study

I am a tax payer in southern Vermont from Wilmington. I am 82 years old. You guys are KILLING ME with school taxes. Now we find out that not only are we paying a bundle, but our kids are not getting the benefit of the money! Please amend S.46 to allow a study and recommendations on the Pupil Weighting Factors Report.

Claudette Hollenbeck
Wilmington, Vt.

Jeannie Lowell

From: Douglas Korb <dkorb@windhamcentralboard.org>
Sent: Friday, February 28, 2020 10:56 AM
To: Testimony
Cc: David Holzapfel; Dan MacArthur; Celena Romo_SB; Lissa Harris; Forrest Holzapfel; Emily Long; Emily Long; Becca Balint; Jeanette White; Laura Sibilila
Subject: Pupil Weighting Study - Marlboro School Board Testimony for March 11
Attachments: Marlboro School Board To Legislature re Pupil Weightin Study.docx

Dear VT State Representatives,

The Marlboro School Board wishes to express its condemnation of the injustices that have persisted within the Vermont schools' Pupil Weighting System over the last 20 years. The 2019 Pupil Weighting Study Report laid bare the egregious inequities that have existed for two decades, and the utter failure of the Agency of Education and Legislature to analyze and rectify these inequalities. The Marlboro School has felt this malfeasance most keenly in the last few years as we have attempted to make necessary infrastructure repairs. Our building has been in desperate need of substantial repairs for a number of years but the financial strain that a new roof, for example, would place on the taxpayers of Marlboro has forced the Board to repeatedly delay this and other much needed renovations. While we have dutifully worked within the constraints of the current inequitable system, we've run out of band-aids. To add insult to injury, this current year has Marlboro incurring a penalty of over \$200,000 for crossing the excess spending threshold. We feel that this penalty should be waived given the years of inequity that has brought us to this point.

The conclusions revealed by the Weighting Study clearly point to gross failures within the Agency and the Legislature to monitor and assess enacted policies which place an undue financial burden on many Vermont communities while benefiting others. This inequality is unconscionable. That our State leaders have allowed this to happen through their inattention, year after year, is unacceptable.

We insist that the Legislature implement the recommendations of the 2019 Pupil Weighting Study Report immediately in order to make amends for the burdens it has inequitably placed upon taxpayers for decades. Though a failure of omission rather than commission, the financial hardship to the taxpayers has been the same regardless. This immediate correction will assist our town - along with many others throughout the State - in protecting our students' rights to a safe and secure place of learning while relieving our taxpayers from the undue burden of legislative oversight failure.

The Marlboro School Board

Douglas Korb, Chair
Dan MacArthur, Vice Chair
Lissa Harris, Clerk
Celena Romo, Director
David Holzapfel, Director

CC: Rep. Emily Long
Rep. Becca Balint
Rep. Jeanette White
Rep. Laura Sibilila
Marlboro Town Clerk

Attached with Letterhead

Marlboro School District

PO Box D Marlboro, VT 05344
Voice 802-254-2668 ~ Fax 802-254-8768

Dear VT State Representatives,

The Marlboro School Board wishes to express its condemnation of the injustices that have persisted within the Vermont schools' Pupil Weighting System over the last 20 years. The 2019 Pupil Weighting Study Report laid bare the egregious inequities that have existed for two decades, and the utter failure of the Agency of Education and Legislature to analyze and rectify these inequalities. The Marlboro School has felt this malfeasance most keenly in the last few years as we have attempted to make necessary infrastructure repairs. Our building has been in desperate need of substantial repairs for a number of years but the financial strain that a new roof, for example, would place on the taxpayers of Marlboro has forced the Board to repeatedly delay this and other much needed renovations. While we have dutifully worked within the constraints of the current inequitable system, we've run out of band-aids and to add insult to injury, this current year has Marlboro incurring a penalty of over \$200,000 for crossing the excess spending threshold. We feel that this penalty should be waived given the years of inequity that has brought us to this point.

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The Marlboro School Board

Douglas Korb, Chair
Dan MacArthur, Vice Chair
Lissa Harris, Clerk
Celena Romo, Director
David Holzapfel, Director

Jeannie Lowell

Subject: FW: [External] Testimony
Attachments: FINAL Pupil Weighting Factors Testimony 3_11_20.pdf

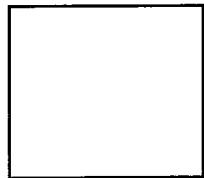
From: Sheila Soule <ssoule@anwsd.org>
Sent: Wednesday, March 11, 2020 11:41 AM
To: Philip Baruth <PBaruth@leg.state.vt.us>; Jeannie Lowell <JLowell@leg.state.vt.us>
Cc: Ruth Hardy <RHardy@leg.state.vt.us>; Jeff Francis <jfrancis@vtvsa.org>
Subject: [External] Testimony

[External]

Hello,

I will be unable to attend the public hearing this afternoon however I wanted to provide you with written testimony from my perspective as a Superintendent in Addison County. My colleagues Patrick Reen, MAUSD, and Peter Burrows, ACSD have provided input into this testimony. My best to the committee as you continue to discuss this important topic. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any follow-up questions.

--



Sheila Soule
Superintendent of Schools
Addison Northwest School District

<http://www.anwsd.org>
Follow me on Twitter @Sheila_SouleVT

"We envision a kind, collaborative, and creative community for all that nurtures a diverse and accessible learning environment. Students will flourish as critical thinkers and productive citizens, cultivating resilience in an ever changing world."

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Addison Northwest

SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Senate Education Committee Meeting
Public Hearing: Pupil Weighting Factors
March 11, 2020

Testimony of Sheila Soule, Superintendent Addison Northwest School District

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the Pupil Weighting Factors Report and the subsequent Joint Fiscal Office's (JFO) preliminary analysis. I come with my own perspective as a Superintendent of Addison Northwest School district, in addition to the perspectives of my colleague superintendents from the neighboring school districts of Addison Central School District and Mount Abraham Unified School District. All three Addison School districts have faced a precipitous decline in equalized pupils over the past few years and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future as the decline in students reaches our High Schools. This decline has resulted in unsustainable tax increases and Equalized Per Pupil spending at or above the penalty threshold despite (in some cases) decreases to our expenditure budgets. These continued challenges will likely result in significant impacts on the quality of the educational experience for our students over time as we continue to eliminate or otherwise reduce programming in order to minimize the tax burden for our communities. This will have the unintended consequence of creating greater inequities across the state as we face the burden and brunt of Vermont's population crisis.

The result of the modeling provided by the JFO does not mitigate the issues for the Addison County schools in any way particularly if the spending threshold remains in place and if we must continue to show the percent increase in equalized pupil spending in the budget article on our ballots. In fact, this will make it much worse. Due to our steadily declining enrollment, Addison County schools are already at or over the spending threshold despite cutting millions of dollars from our budgets and this will remain true for the foreseeable future. The proposed changes to the weighting formula will mean millions of dollars in additional cuts to our schools. This causes great concern for our ability to have reasonable class sizes, offer programming such as athletics, the arts, and advanced courses and ensure we have the necessary personnel to support our struggling learners. If the goal of changing the weighting study is to improve equity it is important to ask if this description of the possible future of Addison County sounds equitable to you.

We support the study of this important topic and support the findings outlined in the report. We believe that changes to Vermont's Education Funding System are needed to support and improve equity across the state. The weighting system is an important part of this change process however, there are many interrelated parts that need to be considered together and the impacts must be studied before rolling out changes. It is difficult to predict how the changes will impact my district when taken into the context of the other changes we are experiencing (Act 173, School Construction aid, expiration of the tax incentives provided by ACT 46 voluntary mergers, other categorical grants like the Small Schools grant). It will be important to have accurate information about impacts as we communicate about this with our respective communities. This is a statewide conversation and it is unclear at this time how the impacts will be rolled out in communities like ours with enough support to identify a path forward through what will follow.

Dear Senator Baruth and Members of the Senate Education Committee

Thank you for reading this testimony that I am unable to give in person at this afternoon's hearing. I wish circumstances had allowed me to be with you.

My name is Martha Heath and I chair the Essex Westford School District Board. Our board has great concern about the impact on our school district were the changes recommended by the "Weighting Study" implemented. We believe the impacts would be very detrimental to our students.

The charts in the study show that implementation of the weighting changes could increase the equalized homestead tax rate in our district by as much as 40 cents (28%). The update done by JFO shows that decreasing to 18 cents....still a very high number. Since our taxpayers would likely not be willing to agree to such a substantial increase, we would be forced to decrease our spending on students. We have spent the years since our merger began becoming as efficient as possible. Since further efficiencies are not possible, we would need to look to cut student programming. Part of the "promise of merger" we "sold" to our communities was increased opportunities for students. Implementation of the weighting study could result in the direct opposite happening.

I urge each of you to think carefully about the interaction between Act 46 and this study. One of the communities in our merged district would have benefited from the weighting study changes but because it merged with urban districts this community could end up paying a lot more for education. Is this the outcome you desire? Is there a way to address the concerns raised by the study without upending all that Act 46 is accomplishing? Please consider these questions carefully.

Furthermore, the impact on Special Education funding would be devastating. According to the study, our district could lose 25% of its funding for special education. It is difficult to imagine how we would meet the needs of our students on IEPs. We would certainly struggle to have the resources to provide the kind of better outcomes for struggling students that the new funding construct was conceived to accomplish. Furthermore, the issue of

MOE (federally required maintenance of effort) isn't addressed in the study. This deserves very careful consideration and discussion.

Our board shares the concern of the authors of the study that addressing students who live in poverty, the education of ELL students and the education of students in rural areas through changes in the weighting of students within our present funding systems could result in lower taxes for residents in these school districts without improving the quality of education these students receive. This would certainly be the case if there were a rush to implement the recommendations this year since budgets have already been voted. The only result would be lower taxes for the residents of those communities. And we know it would then be difficult to increase budgets in future years to address student need. Would it make more sense to provide categorical aid instead? Or should there be a mechanism for the state to make certain increased opportunities are being provided for these students? Should districts who will be adversely affected by the proposed weighting changes be given technical assistance to help them adjust to the dramatic changes without reducing the educational outcomes for all students? We hope you will consider these and the many other questions that will undoubtedly be raised.

Finally, if you do decide to implement the changes the study proposes I urge you to provide more resources for education by adding new funding sources to the Education Fund to lessen the impact on school districts like ours, that you do the implementation over a time frame that allows districts to adjust and that you phase out the small schools grant as the weighting changes take affect as the study advocates.

I know you have a challenging job as you make decisions about what to do with the Weighting Study recommendations. I ask you to carefully consider the many concerns and questions as you do so.

Martha Heath, Chair

Essex Westford School District Board

Jeannie Lowell

Subject: FW: [External] Weighting Study

Jody Normandeau
Dummerston, VT 05301
jodydvt@gmail.com

Senator Philip Baruth

Chair Senate Education Committee

Dear Chairman Baruth:

It is my understanding that you will be having a hearing on Wednesday, March 11 at 4:00 p.m. on the weighting study. I am writing today concerning that study and wish to have my concerns entered into the record.

Twenty-Three years ago (February, 1997), a decision was handed down by the Vermont Supreme Court, called the Brigham Decision, that guaranteed the right to equal educational opportunities. The decision stated that children living in property poor districts should be afforded an equal opportunity of access to similar education revenues as those children who lived in property rich districts. This idea of equality was because our education system is funded by the value of properties.

Just four months later, in June, 1997, the legislature passed Act 60, a law that was supposed to make sure that every child had access to an equal education and a horrendously complicated education formula that most people could never understand. It is now widely believed that Act 60 violates Brigham.

Over the last twenty-three years, rural areas with smaller schools have complained that they are not funding based on the types of student they have. Students, especially of lower income, have fallen behind students of more means. Students who need help learning the English language need more help. Small rural schools without good access to libraries and internet have not been helped.

Then came Act 46, in 2015, that forced schools across the state to consolidate whether or not there was a need. They were all merged, at the whim of the Agency of Education, by way of the State Board of Education. Now, because of this forced consolidation, small rural schools are being over run and even closed by the larger towns in their district. Schools that had large debts have now pushed that debt on schools that had no debt. And there are so many other issues.

In 2018, Act 173 was passed requiring a study to evaluate the current weighting of students. UVM, Rutgers, and The American Institutes of Research were commissioned to look at how the State's educational money was being spent and whether it was being spent equitably across the state. The study came back to the legislature and has made it pretty clear that students of poverty, students who don't speak english, small rural schools miles away from larger centers of population, and students in Middle Schools, especially in smaller schools, have been penalized and short changed for 23 years, by not being weighted properly

It is now up to the legislature to make this right, especially for the students of poverty and the small rural schools They deserve to have whatever educational support is needed in order to bring them up to their peers. They deserve to have all the benefits of the wealthier and larger towns. These students have been short changed for twenty-three years. Act 60 and Act 46 are not working the way they were envisioned. Past legislators are even now saying Act 46, as enacted, is not what they voted for.

There are people in the education hierarchy now who are asking you to go slowly. Act 60 was passed four months after the Supreme Court Brigham decision. Please do not wait to change the funding mechanism. Today's legislature could start to fix this problem. They have had plenty of time to think about it over the years, as there have been many pleas to change the funding system. I know now, what the poorer schools have always known, and it is known all over the state, and if this is not addressed, there will probably be many court challenges to Act 60 to come. Vermont needs to address this soon, not later.

I am also copying a letter below from Representative Laura Sibilila, that was in VT Digger, that pretty much includes all that needs to be said. Please read it and listen to her and anyone else who will be writing and testifying from the local communities. The Education Associations do not represent the people. They represent their organizations. You are the people's voice and you need to represent us.

Thank you very much for listening.

Sincerely,

Jody Normandeau

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Laura Sibilila's letter in VT Digger

Vermont's existing education funding formula, Act 60, also known as the Equal Educational Opportunity Act, was signed into law in June of 1997. The Legislature drafted the law in response to a Vermont Supreme Court decision that said Vermont's existing educational funding system was unconstitutional. The court, in Brigham v. State of Vermont, concluded that the state must provide "substantially equal access" to education for all Vermont students, regardless of where they reside.

In 2018 the Vermont House and Senate, concerned that the existing education funding formula wasn't effective in equalizing education costs, and by extension, opportunities to learn for students across the state, passed Act 173. The law required the Scott administration to undertake a study to evaluate whether the current weights for economically-disadvantaged students, English language learners (ELL), and secondary-level students should be modified and if new weights should be incorporated into the equalized pupil calculation.

The concept of evaluating existing student weights had been requested for years by local districts, introduced in numerous legislative sessions, repealed, reintroduced and the subject of a threatened legal enforcement action against the former secretary of education by members of the House in 2017.

Under Act 60, tax rates were directly tied to per pupil spending. Act 60 assured that when districts spent the same amount per pupil, residents would have identical tax rates regardless of the town's property wealth. In other words, a key measure of student equity was and is determined by per pupil spending. The two factors used to determine per pupil spending are the total amount of spending divided by the total number of students.

Weighting of students adjusts for differences in the cost of educating different types of students. Changing the student weights has the effect of changing the overall number of students in the district. Generally, under Act 60, decreasing the number of students increases a district's cost per pupil and tax rates. Increasing the number of students decreases a district's cost per pupil and tax rates.

On Dec. 24, 2019, a completed Pupil Weighting Factors Report was sent to the House and Senate Committees on Education, the House Committee on Ways and Means, and the Senate Committee on Finance. This report was prepared by educational researchers from the University of Vermont, Rutgers University, American Institutes for Research and American Institutes for Research Constitutional.

The researchers found little empirical evidence for Vermont's existing weights and recommended dramatic increases in weights for students in poverty and ELL and new weights for middle school students, students in small schools and weights on the basis of population density (rurality).

The report findings indicate that, since Act 60, Vermont has denied rural and poor students access to equitable financial resources and we have financially penalized districts that have tried to spend the resources to meet their poor and rural students needs. At the same time, we incentivized larger wealthier districts to spend more on purchasing student opportunity – without tax penalty – for 20 years. That is an entire generation.

The Pupil Weighting Factors Report is comprehensive, conclusive and clear. Vermont's Secretary of Education Dan French testified that the report shows "... immediate action by the General Assembly is necessary to address a significant equity concern in the current education funding system ..."

The Legislature is not debating the findings of the report we asked for. But the timeline for correcting the weights and the corresponding inequity is being debated. This is difficult for many legislators. Large and wealthy districts whose students have benefited from being able to over access state education property tax funds raised across all of Vermont will need to cut their budgets or raise their taxes when we correct the weights. It is an election year, which could further constrain the courage to do what is right and correct this massive generational injustice perpetuated on Vermont's poor and rural students and all property taxpayers.

Surely, we do not need the courts to tell us to do the simple and right thing by our students and taxpayers. Vermont has a history of providing leadership to the nation on so many policy areas. Correcting the inequitable weights and addressing the negative effects for districts that have been able to over access state resources is completely doable this year in our very small state's very large General Assembly.

Vermonters can weigh in on the Pupil Weighting Factors Report Wednesday, March 11, at 4 p.m. in Room 11 of the Vermont Statehouse or by submitting written testimony to testimony@leg.state.vt.us

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Jeannie Lowell

Subject: FW: [External] Pupil Weighting Study

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Brighton Elementary School is located in Island Pond, a rural, sparsely populated and geographically isolated town in the Northeast Kingdom. We have about 120 PK-8 students, with a relatively high poverty rate (58% FRL) and a high special education population (28% currently on IEPs or undergoing special education evaluations, and another 8% on 504 plans). Additionally, 4% of our students are homeless and the majority come from single-parent households and/or families where at least one parent/guardian is deceased, incarcerated, or struggling with mental illness or addiction. Given all of these risk factors, it is no surprise that we have many students who experience serious mental health crises on a regular basis. This requires that our special educator, guidance counselor, behavior support specialist, and classroom teachers spend time every day helping to de-escalate, restrain and/or escort students. As a result, these professionals are not available to educate the rest of students who are ready to learn.

Too much of our resources are spent reacting to students when they are dysregulated, rather than focusing on prevention and intervention. We need to double down our resources and provide students opportunities to learn self-regulation and support their social-emotional growth. This is critical not only for the students who struggle with behavior, but also all of the students who do come to school ready to learn. All too often these students are missing out because their classroom had to be evacuated (in the 15 school days in December we had 11 classroom evacuations, lasting from 5 to 30 minutes), their classmates are disrupting the learning environment or making it feel unsafe or their teacher is not available because they are responding to a crisis. In addition, too much of my time as a principal is spent with a single escalated child and another adult. This takes away time when I should be in classrooms as an instructional leader, supporting the overall school climate, or building relationships with students and staff in a proactive manner. Working with a population like Brighton's is very difficult for staff, leading to teacher burnout and poorer school climate.

Our staff has been trained in Universal Design for Learning, Responsive Classroom or Developmental Design and Restorative Approaches. We are working hard to create a safe environment where students learn to be respectful and responsible, but sometimes students need more than we offer at school. Many students have been diagnosed with ED and the psychologist always recommends counseling as a necessary service for the students success. Currently we do not have a school-based clinician and there aren't any private practice counselors with openings within a 30 minute (25 mile) radius. Ideally, we need to hire a school-based clinician to meet these needs.

In conclusion, I highly support the recommendations in the weighting study, especially for increasing the weights for poverty and sparsity. This formula has not been updated since I was a student in these rural Northeast Kingdom schools, and I can attest, from first-hand experience from both sides of the desk, schools and students have changed drastically in that time. Small schools grants were meant to alleviate some of the burden of operating a small school, but even that funding is not guaranteed for our school. The cost of educating our students is high, but the cost of not educating our students as they deserve is even higher.

April Butler Lane

Principal

Brighton Elementary School

Island Pond, VT 05846

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