



## THE COALITION FOR VERMONT STUDENT EQUITY

**To:** Chair of the House Committee on Education Representative Kate Webb, Members of the House Committee on Education

**From:** The Coalition for Vermont Student Equity

**Date:** April 21, 2021

**Subject:** S.13

Dear Chair Webb and members of the House Committee on Education;

We thank the House Committee on Education for their attention to the critical matter of equitable student weighting. For decades, districts across the state have suffered from a lack of taxing capacity due to an inaccurate pupil weighting calculation. In 2019, the Pupil Weighting Factors Report (requested by the legislature) documented inequities in this formula and confirmed what many districts have been experiencing: by being undercounted and in combination with the excess spending threshold, our children have been unable to access equitable educational opportunities as guaranteed in the Vermont Constitution, and based on the Brigham Decision.

Our districts are hurting, plain and simple. Some undercounted districts have been unable to provide the scope of educational services needed to achieve equity in student outcomes. Other undercounted districts have incurred large tax rate increases in efforts to provide those important services. We are rural districts, small schools, economically disadvantaged districts experiencing generational poverty and we are districts with large populations of New American English Language Learners.

What we hear time and time again in the legislature are concerns over how wealthier, overweighted districts will adjust to the corrected weights. What we don't hear enough is concern for the districts that are suffering now and have been for decades. We understand some of you represent these overweighted districts, but we implore you to seek equity even when it feels politically difficult, and to act in the best general interests of the state. We are asking you to do the right thing, for all students in Vermont, and to understand that correcting the weights isn't what will create "winners and losers". This frames equity as a system that creates losers, however, it does not. Equity creates equitable educational opportunities and outcomes for all of the state's students. The question needs to be framed as "how do we create equity?" instead of "how do we maintain the status quo while placating underweighted districts?"

Our coalition, first and foremost, supports the clear, phased in approach in H.54. Having a three-year roll-out seems like a reasonable compromise to our coalition. However, if S.13 is the bill we have to work with now, we ask that some changes be made to get us closer to a compromise bill.



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We support the concept of an implementation taskforce IF the scope of considerations is limited to how to implement the weights. As S.13 is written now, it creates a broad scope for the taskforce to undertake and it muddies the waters. An implementation taskforce should be solely focused on creating a plan to implement the corrected weights as recommended by the 2019 report. Categorical aid and the Tax Structure Commission Report are considerations for another taskforce. We would like the content of this bill to match the bill's description: an implementation taskforce. As Secretary French testified in your committee last week, this bill, as written, doesn't get us closer to implementing the corrected weights.

- We would like to see Sec. 2 amended to narrow the scope of the charge and considerations of the taskforce. Their work should be limited to creating a plan to implement the corrected weights.
- Categorical aid is simply not an appropriate solution to the flawed pupil weights:
  - Categorical aid is not equity, as it complicates the formulas and makes it hard to measure differences in student spending need throughout the state
  - Categorical aid is not equity, as it allows for local agency and flexibility in spending decisions for some districts and not others. It also adds administrative expenses to the most struggling districts.
  - Stakeholders universally oppose continuing with making up for funding inequities through the small schools grants and favor rolling them into weights, why would we be expanding this type of system when stakeholders all say we should be eliminating it?
  - Categorical aid is not equity because it is still disproportionately placing the taxpayer burden on underweighted districts to contribute taxes into categorical aid, which otherwise should have been money that just belonged to them from the weights.
- We would like to see Sec. 3 amended to clearly define that the requirement for additional legislative action should be to consider and implement the corrected weights as recommended in the Report and by the taskforce. This still doesn't guarantee that the legislature will pass something in 2022. But it does clarify what they will need to consider passing.



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- UVM is the only consultant qualified to assist with the implementation plan. S.13 must be amended to assign this role to the researchers who worked on the 2019 Pupil Weighting Factors Report.
- Because certain districts have been harmed by a lack of taxing capacity, and because the current stakeholder group in S.13 doesn't immediately represent underfunded districts, we ask that the Coalition for Vermont Student Equity be added to the group of stakeholders outlined in S.13 to ensure harmed districts have a seat at the table.
- If public meetings are to be held, we ask that at least two occur in historically underweighted districts. We feel it's critical that a false equivalence not be drawn between what underweighted districts are facing under an inequitable system now, and what overweighted districts will face after equity is created in the formula. Creating real equity requires listening to those who have been historically harmed by inequitable systems.
- Underweighted school districts are overtaxed and underfunded. With less taxing capacity to provide for the basic needs of students, underweighted districts are more likely to exceed the spending threshold. While the taskforce considers the best path forward, we ask that immediate relief be offered to communities that are hurting by suspending the excess spending threshold.
- In order to create and implement a thoughtful approach to updating the weights, the taskforce and Vermonters must have access to accurate data that reflects the actual changes they will experience when the pupil weights are corrected. We ask that you please add language to S.13 that would require that the simulator be updated ASAP.

Even with the scope of work narrowed in S.13 as we are requesting, we recognize that the legislature will still need to come back next year to approve the recommendations made by the taskforce. For this reason, it's important that the taskforce answers one question only: what is the best general interest approach for implementing the corrected pupil weights? We believe that adding other questions and considerations to the work of the taskforce will take us farther away from the answer to the question we keep hearing: how do you actually implement the corrected weights? Let's get an actual answer to this question so the legislature can take informed next steps.

We deeply appreciate the work of the legislature, especially during this difficult year of remote legislating. Asking the taskforce to work solely on an implementation plan for the corrected



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weights will be accepted as a reasonable compromise by our coalition of districts and we implore you to strengthen S.13 and allow this process to move forward.

Sincerely,

The Coalition for Vermont Student Equity