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**Pupil Weighting Testimony**

**Submitted To:** The House Committee on Education

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First, I’d like to thank the House Education Committee for giving me the opportunity to offer this testimony on behalf of the Coalition for Vermont Student Equity, a coalition of school districts/supervisory unions from all over the state. A coalition that unites both urban and rural areas together on an issue that we believe ensures a healthy and viable future for Vermont. I am here speaking to you about taking action this legislative session to implement the recommendations made in the Pupil Weighting Factors Report. I will speak to you first about my experience in Winooski, and then submit my recommendations for S.13

Even though the examples I give today are based on my personal experiences as a Winooski school board member, I am here to speak to you as a fellow Vermonter. I am pleading with you, our state legislators, to come together and support the implementation the Pupil Weighting Factors Report recommendations. Vermonters are defined by our passion for equity and a strong democracy.

This democracy that we cherish is threatened by the inequities of our educational funding formula. No doubt, we had an inkling that there are cracks to what we hoped to achieve and be, because of our current education funding formula. It was only a few years ago that legislators commissioned a study that was completed by esteemed University of Vermont Professor Tammy Kolbe and her research team. The research team used data to highlight what many already suspected: It costs more to educate certain types of students.

Let me speak to how the inequities in the current weighting formula impacts the Winooski School District. In our school district, we have about 800 students and with the current weighting formula we have about 1,000 equalized pupils, which amounts to about \$16,700 per equalized pupil. Yet with the empirical and research-based weighting formula, Winooski would have about 1,600 equalized pupils or about \$10,200 per equalized pupil. When I first joined the school board, I had difficulty understanding why our budget decisions was choosing between basic necessities. Our school board was choosing between giving our teacher school supplies and transportation or a new building. We ended up choosing the building, because we had special education teachers meeting students in repurposed classrooms and using bathrooms as storage rooms (For more information about schools see (<https://cp.winooski.org/overview/>.) These struggles were due to the inequities of our education weighting formula that reduced our town’s taxing capacity. It was foolish of me to think that being on the school board meant deciding on funding between the art programs or finding money for new sporting equipment.

As someone who has a doctorate in education, I know how much education has changed in the last 30 years. We now understand that students do not come to school has empty vessels where knowledge is just taught via a teacher lecturing to 25 students in a classroom. We recognize that not all things are equal for students. We know that external factors exists that can affect students’ ability to learn. Generational poverty, for example, exists in our city and creates barriers that

prevent our students from reaching their full potential. Generational poverty means that our school district not only needs to consider how to educate our students but also how to feed them and how to provide them with healthcare. Because of many of our families' circumstances, they often cannot afford the luxury of taking time off from work to go to the doctors. By addressing their healthcare problems, we create better learners. We believe that all of our students deserve to lead healthy, productive and successful lives and that this will help them to better engage with their local and global community.

And a global community Winooski has. We are enriched by the New Americans who have settled into our state and I am fortunate enough to live in a city that is home to many of them. If we are to truly integrate and benefit from the diversity these families bring, then as a school district we needed to invest extra resources into our educational system. This allows us to build a stronger community. The obvious investment is in our English as a Second Language program. Some see this as burden, but I see this as an investment especially as research from University of Vermont Professor Pablo Bose shows that the second generation generates a net benefit to the economy. I can assure you this net benefit is not just for Winooski, but also for Vermont.

Having been fortunate enough to mentor two New Americans, I can already see the investment in them paying off. One has dreams of becoming governor of Vermont and I think he is well on his way because he will be starting college at a top 20 university on a full ride. I have a feeling the other will be a doctor as she starts her journey in the fall at a top liberal arts college. The hard part for me to swallow is that right now these students are exceptions and not the norm. An inequitable weighting formula prevents us from serving all of our students in our district in an equitable fashion and we are dependent on altruistic community members to fill the gaps.

The other investment is in our cultural liaisons. These liaisons help us build a community where all families can support and take part in their children's education. A fact that is often taken for granted by many of us. Our cultural liaisons do more than translate and ensure constant communication between parents and our schools. They also help build trust between the New American population and the government. We have to remember many of them were exiled from their countries because they were vocal about their government. Regardless of us welcoming them to our country, it doesn't take a leap of faith as to understand why they don't trust government.

This was made evident when two of our students made a [music video](#), "Let's go to School" in Swahili, their native language. This song was about how Vermont gave them an opportunity for a better life. When Representative Welch wanted to meet these students, which for many of us is an honor, it took our cultural liaisons several hours to convince their parents to let them meet him. They feared that having a governmental official know them would mean future trouble. I actually do not blame them for feeling this way, because of their past experiences with government. I am fortunate that they trust our schools and slowly stronger bonds are formed between them and the community at large. This is not meant to be a complaint, but an illustration of reality. I cannot emphasize enough, we want these families here, because they enrich our community. Thus, our cultural liaisons, who have teaching degrees from their home countries, are worthwhile investments for our schools and city. And truthfully, I hope there are ways for us

to increase their salaries, because they are woefully underpaid. Having a formula that is not equitable, means we depend on people's generosity and kindness and we hope it is enough to cover what should be provided by our state.

Oddly enough even if we were to spend the money we needed to support our students, the system would penalize us for exceeding the spending threshold. For thirty years, our school district has been living in a system that was stacked against us. What's made this all worst is that we are then blamed when our students do not do well on standardized tests. Outcomes that realtors then use to shepherd families away from our city to other locations in Vermont. There is a reason why 62% of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch in our district. Their families cannot afford to live anywhere else. Yet instead of shunning them – we embrace the challenges. Please allow the districts that are willing to accept these challenges be given a fair chance to educate their students. I hope I have given you an idea of the real-life impacts of the current weighting formula and its detrimental impact on our children and our community. This is why I believe that we do not need a committee to study the weights again but instead a committee that will develop a plan to implement the weights from the Pupil Weighting Factors Report.

One of the most enduring traits of a Vermonter is that we do our best to be self-sufficient with the hopes of never needing to ask for help. When we do ask for help, there is always a fellow Vermonter there with a helping hand. As a Vermonter and school board member, I have given my heart and soul to give every child in our district a great education. I have come to realize that I cannot do this alone, especially when the system is stack against our district. Thus, I was grateful when the Coalition for Vermont Student Equity was formed, because I realized our district was not alone in fighting for equity. In a time where we are more likely to be polarized than united, I found myself standing side by side with school board members from the Northeast Kingdom, Bennington, Burlington, Rutland, Montpelier, and Windham County. Vermonters united by our passion for equity and democracy. Yet, we realized that we cannot do this alone and we humbly ask the House Education Committee to take up our recommendations to the bill. We need your help. Our children need your help. Please do not frame this legislation in terms of winners and losers, but instead take pride that we will create something that will strengthen the character of our state by ensuring all of our children that they will have an equitable education. With an educated populace, our democracy will be nourished and strengthen.

Thank you.

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Winooski School Board Trustee

### S.13:

This is being called "an implementation task force", the clear implication being that it is a task force to create an implementation plan for the updated weights. The intent of the bill says that the "General Assembly has chosen to develop a phased approach to revising the weighting formula." This bill language doesn't reflect this intent. As it is written now, S.13 is simply another summer study.

The work of the taskforce created in S.13 must be limited to considering only how to implement the updated weights as recommended in the Pupil Weighting Factors Report. The legislature's plan for additional action must be limited to considering and voting on the implementation plan created by the taskforce to update the weights. The task force needs to come up with an implementation plan and the legislature will still need to come back to approve it. This bill doesn't guarantee that the legislature will do anything. They can still come back next year and thoughtfully consider it. What this bill does is assure your constituents, many who are very upset by our inaction for so long, that there is real work being done to create a plan to do this should the legislature decide to approve the plan next year.

- 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.

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. 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 must offer immediate relief to communities that are hurting by suspending the excess spending threshold.

Since the Act 46 mergers, the simulator is nearly unusable. In order to create and implement a thoughtful approach to updating the weights, Vermonters must have access to accurate data that reflects the actual changes they will experience when the pupil weights are updated. The simulator must be updated this year.

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.

