



Vermont RURAL EDUCATION Collaborative

Dear Vermont Policy Makers,

We are writing in follow up to our letter of January 2020 urging action related to the Weighting Study commissioned by the Legislature and received in December 2019. We applaud the Legislature for being willing to take on such important and difficult issues around education funding given the many challenges we face at this time. These are large systemic issues that demand sound public policy and maintaining the status quo is not sufficient. As leaders and practitioners in the field of education serving 7 districts and over 5,000 students we have insights into how these issues play out for children, families, their schools and communities. Consequently, we hope our perspective will be helpful and useful to you as you work on resolving these pressing problems.

1. income-based approach Education Funding.

We support a shift to a funding system based on income not property. We need a simpler system than the current system in place, and we believe income a better measure of ability to pay than property. The recent report from the tax commission supports this recommendation and agrees that the current complexity of the system overwhelms its effectiveness. As our school board members and community members deliberate local budgets in our fiscally conservative part of the state we see the need for the recommendations of the tax study to be acted on by the legislature. On page 50 of the study it notes that a heavier weighting for poverty and a move to an income tax will improve the equity outcomes of the education system.

2. Adjustments are needed to Act 173.

The implementation of Act 173 is problematic for districts with high special education numbers. A block grant for funding is inherently inequitable and does not account for actual needs. Without adjustment districts with high special education numbers will lose essential resources while districts with lower special education numbers will receive increased resources. Districts with high numbers will still be required to serve the students in need. Meanwhile other districts will gain resources and will not only be able to serve special education students fully but also be able to provide interventions to non-special education students with the additional resources they receive.

The flexible use of resources envisioned by Act 173 is an advantage with sufficient resources brought to bear but with dramatic cuts it fails to serve students and increases

the stark inequities that already exist. Weighting may answer some of the issue, but needs to be carefully considered. We are skeptical of the promise of flexibility with a block grant when we are faced with a decrease in funding and have no flexibility, given our requirement for a maintenance of effort to fulfil requirements of IEPs. Adjustments must be made as indicated in Section 11 of the Weighting report below, independent of a full consideration of the weighting report or as part of a comprehensive implementation of the weighting report recommendations, adjustments are urgent pending the implementation of Act 173.

3. Weighting Study Recommendations.

The recommendations in the weighting study related to childhood poverty needs attention, it is well documented that children from poverty need additional resources. Increased weighting for poverty would enhance equity within the system. With increased mental health needs in rural communities many of the issues of systemic poverty need to be addressed as a whole in our society, increased resources to children via additional weighting for poverty would help address this issue..

Factors of sparsity and rurality also need careful attention. Currently the system for distribution of small school grants is inequitable. The original intent of small school's grants was to support essential rural schools that did not have an economy of scale. This need still exists and sparsity and rurality are the recommended measures which are common nationwide as opposed to size. Care must be paid before action so that changes create a more equitable outcome and do not exacerbate the existing inequity in the distribution of funds.

4. H54

H54 urges you to implement the recommendations of the weighting study, we agree that there is a need to carefully look at weighting and categorical aid comprehensively to ensure resources will actually go to the areas of need. H54 is a solid starting point for work in the House Committee for Education.

Thank you for your leadership in stepping up to act on these issues. We stand ready to testify and bring forth information as you take up this work.

DocuSigned by:
Sincerely

Margaret MacLean

4650F9CE59E14FD1
Vermont Rural Education Collaborative

Executive Committee

Margaret MacLean, Director

John Castle, Superintendent NCUS

Jennifer Botzjoorns Superintendent Kingdon East

Karen Conway, Superintendent ENSU

vtruraledu.org

Sec. 11. CENSUS GRANT SUPPLEMENTAL ADJUSTMENT; PUPIL WEIGHTING FACTORS; REPORT (a) The Agency of Education, in consultation with the Secretary of Human Services, the Vermont Superintendents Association, the Vermont School Boards Association, and the Vermont-National Education Association, shall consider and make recommendations on the following: (1) Whether the census grant, as defined in the amendment to 16 V.S.A. § 2961 in Sec. 5 of this act, should be increased for supervisory unions that have, in any year, relatively higher costs in supporting students who require additional support, and if so, the criteria for qualification for the adjustment and the manner in which the adjustment should be applied. In making this recommendation, the Agency of Education shall consider the report entitled No. 173 Page 38 of 60 2018 VT LEG #333826 v.1 "Study of Vermont State Funding for Special Education" issued in December 2017 by the University of Vermont Department of Education and Social Services.