

TO: House Committee on Education

FROM: Colin Robinson, Political Director, Vermont-NEA

DATE: February 4, 2021

SUBJECT: Testimony on H.54

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Good afternoon and thank you for allowing for Vermont-NEA to testify on the issue of pupil weighting and H.54. Since the Committee just heard testimony from Professor Kolbe, one of the authors of the report commission by the Legislature titled *“Study of Pupil Weights in Vermont’s Education Funding Formula”*, I will keep my comments a bit more general and flagging a couple issues for consideration.

- **Weighting is important and adjustment is needed** – As the committee has heard, the issue of weighting is complex and the history of how we got the weights we currently have is unclear. We believe how we weight for students, especially those from poverty and with a disability, is very important and making adjustments to the current weighting is needed. We know, and have spoken to this committee several times in previous bienniums, about the complex and increasing social and emotional needs of our students and the impacts that has on their ability to access their learning. How we weight for students with some of those complex needs has the ability to impact how local districts choose to support those same students. What the exact or appropriate weighting should be is beyond our expertise, but clearly the report of Professor Kolbe and her colleagues makes a clear case for the numbers they presented. Poverty is key and we must truly account for those children growing up in poverty and that includes providing schools with the appropriate resources with which to educate children from impoverished backgrounds.
- **Intersection with Act 173 is critical** – Act 173 (2018) is attempting to retool how school districts and educators support students with disabilities and other struggling learners. This is a complex undertaking that has created lots of opportunities for missteps and has required the Legislature to twice delay some key implementation dates as originally enacted. As those of you on the Committee when Act 173 passed will remember it was in fact Section 11 of Act 173 that commissioned the weighting study. The intent was that the results of the weighting study, specifically weighting for students with disabilities, would be incorporated by a future Legislature into the new census based block grant funding structure. We believe that the current census block grant structure of Act 173 should be adjusted to reflect this and ensure that some of the school districts with students that the greatest needs aren’t hurt in the transition. Act 173 is far from being fully implemented, as the Act requires educators to get trained in how to change their education practices to better serve all students, and that training simply hasn’t yet happened.
- **Specific Comments on H.54** – This is a complex bill and I won’t speak to all the details in it.

- Phase-in – We appreciate that the draft bill phases in the poverty weighting, recognizing that this is a big adjustment.
- Moratorium on other changes – We understand why there is a moratorium on any future changes. Often changes to complex system, like the education system, happen with such frequency that it is hard to assess the impacts and make appropriate adjustments. That said, we believe adjustment of pupil weights is only one adjustment that should be made to the education funding system and worry that as drafted H.54 wouldn't allow for those other changes.
- Studies and assessment of impacts – We appreciate that H.54 has several studies and assessments built into the bill and a comprehensive oversight body. It is critical that we understand what is and isn't working as any weighting recommendation are enacted. This type of assessment hasn't always been done for other comprehensive changes and we believe such an assessment is critical to ensure that the intentions of the changes are actually being realized.
- **Intersection with Tax Structure** – As you are aware, the Tax Structure Commission has completed the draft of their report with recommendations for adjustment to various taxes. One of their most significant recommendations is to eliminate the residential education property tax, and instead, the Commission recommends funding education through the income tax, as two-thirds of Vermonters already pay based upon their income via the income sensitivity provisions of Acts 60 and 68. I. Vermont-NEA has long supported this fair, common sense adjustment—an income tax for all to fund education. We believe that any adjustments to the weighting should be done in coordination with implementing the recommendations of the Tax Structure Commission. We are nearly 25 years out from the passage of Act 60 and a comprehensive adjustment to how we fund our public schools, support our students and create a fairer system for taxpayers is important.

Thank you for your time and your work.