

To: House Education Committee

From: Danielle Corti, Board Chair, Oxbow Unified Union School District

Re: Special Education Funding

Date: February 2, 2022

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify today. I am testifying on the behalf of the Oxbow Unified Union School District. I will be speaking today about the impact that the change in Special Education funding will have on Oxbow Unified Union School District.

With the implementation of the new funding models by the state, the Oxbow Unified Union School district stands to see a \$640,586.00 increase to our local budget for the cost of delivering services to our students. This is over a 3% increase to our budget with no time allowed to plan or adjust. While the intention of Act 173 is to improve effectiveness, availability and equity of services provided to students there are unintended consequences. As a board we are faced with having to look at ways to reduce our cost and spending in other areas so as not to disrupt services that we are required to provide our students. Even with the OESU applying an \$800,000 surplus in an effort to lessen the impact on the schools in our SU. You may not be aware, but our district struggled to pass our budget two years ago. Having to go to vote four times before it passed. The board made significant cuts at that time. Our schools are already running very lean and there is little that I see that we can cut that will not have a direct negative impact on our students.

Some of the studies used to guide these funding changes point to best practices that include having highly qualified special education teachers and interventionists in both the schools and the SU to service the students. This makes sense but this transition will take time and planning to implement. As an

SU we have two significant challenges in making this transition. One, there is a shortage of qualified candidates in these fields. And two as rural communities we have struggled to hire and retain professionals in these and other education fields. The result is that in our area we rely on paraeducators to provide needed services. We understand that this is not ideal and we are working toward the new model but we are required to continue to provide services. This abrupt move causes unnecessary stress to our community. When the state originally planned the implementation of the new funding, they intended it to be accompanied by the updated weighting formula. The weighting formula is delayed, and it would seem prudent to hold off on the funding change until both could be implemented simultaneously. The weighting formula will have a significant impact on the funding our district receives from the state. We would receive additional funding intended to support our most vulnerable students thus softening the blow of the change in special education funding. Not implementing these changes hand in hand would disproportionately burden the very communities they intended to help.

I have been on the board for over 12 years and never has it been more important to focus on what is best for kids. As we have been preparing our budget, we have been working on ways to utilize ESSER funds to provide enriching and engaging opportunities for our kids. However, now we are facing the reality that we may need to use portions of these funds to simply maintain our current educational system to avoid a large tax increase for our communities. An additional concern is, explaining the complexity of education funding is difficult and at quick glance it appears that “the cost of special education is driving up the budget.” However, what is happening is the state is implementing a funding system that is working to improve the effectiveness, availability and equity of the services provided. Trying to get that message across when they are looking at a significant tax increase will not be easy.

Lastly and on a personal level I would like to make the point that Vermont has for years been working to get young people to stay or move here. We pitch the classic rural Vermont scene. You know the one...green common with a small school and a beautiful white church in the background...that is Newbury! That is why my husband and I chose to move back to Vermont to raise our children. We wanted that rural life. Now it feels like we are fighting every step of the way to

have our children educated and supported at the same level as our fellow Vermonters that happen to live in the larger communities in our state. It makes me wonder what we value and where our priorities are. So, what is the message: Come live in Vermont but please live in an urban area so it is easier for us to fund and support you? Personally, I believe that we can do better. We must do better.

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