



Social Equity Caucus
an Inclusive Learning Community

To: Speaker Krowinski, President Pro Temp Balint
CC: Chair Webb, Chair Campion, Chair Ancel, Chair Cummings
From: The Social Equity Caucus
Date: 04/14/21
Subject: S.13

Dear Speaker Krowinski and Senator Balint,

We are writing to urge our colleagues in the House and Senate to pass legislation this session to create a clear and immediate path toward correcting Vermont's pupil weights. We applaud the Senate Committee on Education for sending S.13 over to the House before crossover, and we believe this bill is a great starting point. We understand that this bill was created and passed quickly to give the House time to put additional work into it. We look forward to supporting the work of the House Committee on Education and the House Committee on Ways and Means to make this bill the strongest bill possible.

Adopting the recommendations made in the Pupil Weighting Factors Report of 2019 will be critical to ensuring equity in our education funding system. It has now been demonstrated to us that the education of our most vulnerable children is not being adequately funded due to a lack of taxing capacity for certain districts under the current weights. This includes children from economically disadvantaged communities, geographically isolated children, and New American children who require ELL services. Implementing the corrected weights will ensure districts that have been suffering from inequitable access to taxing capacity have equitable opportunity to access resources for our neediest children.

We ask that S.13 be amended to clearly define the role of the taskforce as that of an implementation taskforce. The implementation taskforce should not be asked to determine which weights to modify or drop altogether, nor should they be tasked with having a broader discussion about Act 173 or the Tax Structure Commission Report and tax reform in general. There is no qualified criticism of the work done to assess and recommend student weights in Act 173. While discussions about categorical aid are important, they do not belong in this bill, as these discussions have no bearing on the weighting of Vermont's pupils in order for the state to fulfill its constitutional duty of ensuring equitable access to resources for all students. The taskforce charge should be focused on creating the plan to implement the corrected weights as recommended by the 2019 Report.

We also ask that the immediate harm being experienced by Vermont students in certain districts be mitigated by amending S.13 to suspend the excess spending threshold. This is not in lieu of implementing the new weights, but a measure that will assist districts that need immediate relief while the implementation taskforce creates a plan to adjust the pupil weighting formula.

Since the Act 46 mergers, the pupil weighting simulator is now improperly configured. In order to create and implement a thoughtful approach to updating the weights, the taskforce and Vermonters in general must have access to data developed utilizing a properly configured simulator to reflect the actual changes districts will likely experience when the pupil weights are updated. We ask that S.13 be amended to

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mandate an update of the simulator to better assist the taskforce with creating a data-driven plan to implement the corrected weights.

We understand there is concern for how communities that have been incorrectly overweighted for decades will react and adjust to the implementation of the corrected weights. But we believe that when working to create more just and equitable systems, the real concern and effort should be geared toward helping the populations who have been harmed by these systems of inequity. We ask that the bill be amended to include at least two public hearings in districts that have experienced the most harm under the current weighting system. When adjusting inequitable systems, we should not create a false equivalence between the harmed districts and the overweighted districts that will be asked to exist under an equitable system. We reject the framing of the new weights as creating a system of “winners” and “losers”; when we frame the new weights this way, we frame equity as a zero-sum game. It is not. There are winners and losers now, and the losers are asking for fairness and equity. No more, no less. Everyone in Vermont will benefit from a fair, equitable education system. Everyone. Most immediately, our children will benefit.

We thank the House and Senate Committees for their work on this critical issue. We understand how difficult it is for all of us to work on sensitive and important policy while legislating remotely, and we want to recognize our House and Senate leadership for doing a superb job guiding us through this process on other critical issues. We know that this issue, as well, can and must be addressed this year.

Sincerely,

The Social Equity Caucus

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