



STATE OF VERMONT
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT WORKING GROUP

April 20, 2021

To: Speaker Krowinski, President Pro Tem. Balint
CC: Chair Webb, Chair Campion, Chair Ancel, Chair Cummings
Members of: *The House Committee on Education, the Senate Committee on Education, the House Committee on Ways and Means, and the Senate Committee on Finance*
From: The Rural Economic Development Working Group
Re: S.13 and School Funding Equity

Dear Speaker Krowinski and President Pro Tem. Balint,

The Rural Economic Development Working Group (REDWnG) is concerned about the injustice rooted in Vermont's allocation of K-12 public school funding. We urge that the 2021 Session not adjourn without a real plan to implement the reforms needed to right this wrong.

Our current system is failing to deliver the Vermont Constitution's promise of equal educational opportunity to many rural and economically-disadvantaged learners. This is not right. There is no dispute; the underfunding of rural schools is both well documented by our own independent experts and acknowledged by the Secretary of Education. We all agree the existing "weighting" formula has been proven flawed, so now it is time for real leadership and action.

The Senate-passed bill, S.13, is a step in the right direction, but it must be improved by the House if we are serious about equity and rural communities. In particular, the bill should be amended to narrow its scope to an implementation plan for weighting system reform and to enact a moratorium on the excess-spending penalty until an appropriately adjusted weighting system is in place.

In short, we seek a real fix to this system injustice, not just a Band-Aid. Fixing the weights means ensuring rural schools have the resources they deserve, and that they know they can count on these resources into the future. Categorical aid is not an appropriate solution to the problem because the additional costs of educating rural students are generalized, not specific.

A system of categorical aid would create more, not less, administrative burden on our small towns and would depend on a controversial supplemental taxing system that could be threatened in the future. This would not only increase the tax burden on the underserved towns, but would also bring with it a whole new set of school funding politics. Directly correcting the pupil weights is the only way to address the root of the problem and to give rural communities confidence that equitable school funding will continue into the future.

For us, this issue touches all aspects of rural communities. Equitable school funding is fundamental not only to the future of our kids and families, but also to the greater economic well-being of rural Vermont. Vibrant, reliably funded schools are key to making rural towns appealing to young families and new community members.

We acknowledge and appreciate all the work that has been done this year to support our rural economies, from a clear commitment for building broadband infrastructure to continuing support for the Working Lands grants. We also view the issue of correcting our state's unjust pupil weights as urgent and foundational to all other work. Simply stated, rural communities cannot strengthen our economies and raise our standard of living if our rural schools are not given a fair chance to thrive.

Sincerely,

Rep. Tiff Bluemle
Rep. Seth Bongartz
Rep. Michelle Bos-Lun
Rep. Elizabeth Burrows
Rep. Scott Campbell
Rep. Marty Feltus
Rep. Kate Donnally
Rep. John Gannon
Rep. James Gregoire
Rep. Lisa Hango

Rep. Stephanie Jerome
Rep. Logan Nicoll
Rep. Woody Page
Rep. Kelly Pajala
Rep. Lucy Rogers
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Rep. Katherine Sims
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