

To: Chair Webb and Members of the House Committee on Education

From: Douglas Korb, Chair, Marlboro School Board

Date: April 21, 2021

Re: S.13

Thank you for allowing me to provide testimony on S.13 and the task force it currently seeks to enact. My name is Douglas Korb, and I am Chair of the Marlboro School Board – a rural, small school district in southern Vermont.

I'd like to start by acknowledging that I'm sorry this committee has the task of rectifying this inequity issue as it has been 20 years since the passage of Act 60 and by my understanding the weighting of pupils should have been a focus immediately after its passage. Nonetheless, the Marlboro School Board and other small, rural, impoverished, and high English Language Learning districts are here as allies to provide information, support, and examples for how the original improper weighting has negatively impacted our schools and our communities these last 20 years. We have also supplied a list of recommendations for the bill following this testimony

The Coalition for Vermont Student Equity is here to aid you in your work. We only ask in return that that you give back an equitable distribution of tax burden for all taxpayers in Vermont. We feel the best, most expedient way to do that is by implementing the weights in accordance with the Pupil Weighting Factors Report led by Dr. Kolbe. As you heard from Dr. Kolbe's testimony last Thursday – solving the inequity issue starts by adjusting the weights in the formula. While there are many implementation factors to consider – as outlined by Dr. Kolbe - the focus and goal of the task force should be on coming back and implementing the weights. There is no disputing the inequity, simply how best to implement it. Still, this nationally publicized study gives you the road map to do so. As Dr. Kolbe said, "you have excellent thought partners in this process." Marlboro and others from our coalition beg you to utilize them, and, most importantly, listen to their guidance. We also ask that the Coalition for Vermont Student Equity be added to the group of stakeholders in the bill to ensure we have a seat at the table as the task force does its work. It is best to not have the task force operate in a vacuum rather have hard examples at the ready.

For those of you unfamiliar with Marlboro it is a town located in Southern Vermont on the side of Hogback Mountain. It has an annual population of 700 and it covers 36 square miles - the majority of which are on Class 3 dirt roads. Our nearest school building neighbor is located down the curved and dangerous Rte. 9 in Brattleboro where there is a difference of 1000 feet of elevation. Marlboro is the shining example of "less than 36 persons per square mile" – a weight outlined within the study.

When the Pupil Weighting Factors Report was released in late 2019, it finally answered a nagging question that the Marlboro School Board had asked itself for quite some time: Why can we not adequately fund our school? Each year the Marlboro School has been forced to "kick the

can” further down the road on various capital improvements or bid farewell to student program resources. We have wished to not overburden the taxpayers who have generously supported increases to their tax rate at select times for unavoidable improvements; however, last year, after being faced with a .30 cent tax increase – as well as a leaking roof in the 5th and 6th grade classroom – the dam had literally broken. We can no longer maintain a school that has adequate school facilities and learning environments. Our town firmly understands the term tax capacity. The average income in Marlboro is \$50,000 for a family of 4 per the last census and we have about 500 families from which to raise an average per pupil cost of \$20,000.

While other towns appear to be losing students, we appear to be growing. Based on current projections, Marlboro’s enrollment could go from 80 ADM two years ago to 120 by 2022. Our school is bursting at the seams. This excites us for our school community’s future, but the education funding formula needs to start working with us instead of against us. For this reason, we disagree with the use of categorical aid to fix the inequity issue. I think Secretary French put it best last Thursday when he said, “categorical aid would be raised from tax rates and if the rates are unequal how would that further the goals of ACT 60?” The State of VT does not have a fundraising issue, it has an inequitable tax rate issue and I’m hoping that when your work is done reviewing S.13 and the make-up and mission of the task force it proposes, that you will aim to have that task force focus solely on how to implement the weights.

Regarding excess spending, for many years, Marlboro was able to stay below the excess spending threshold. However, over the last few years, especially with growing ADM numbers which are always a year behind the funding capability, our excess spending threshold is simply anticipated to be in the budget before the Board even starts discussing its programming needs. This penalty, on top of an already inequitable education tax rate system is unjust. We would ask that you suspend the excess spending threshold while the taskforce undertakes its work.

Accompanying this testimony, I have supplied a 4-minute video. I will be sending a copy to each of your inboxes and I encourage you to watch it. Two students and a teacher helped demonstrate the lack that exists in our community compared to others. However, the most striking element is one not mentioned in the video – it’s the pure and simple fact that these two articulate 8th grade students are fully aware of the disparity that exists across districts. It is not just adults in this conversation - I insist that you not to forget that fact.

Educational resources like full time reading and math specialists (to effectively implement our local common assessments), current professional development for teachers (in scientific inquiry, global citizenship, transferable skills), special programs for students to develop their artistic expression, and counselors and nurses to meet health education needs (as well as maintain a Multi-Tier System of Support) are truly the most valued aspects of a school; however, they are abstract -- there is no better concrete example to prove the disparity that exists than that of a student who sees an old, unsafe play structure removed and nothing new erected in its place due to lack of funding. It is difficult to explain to a 7-year-old that they don’t have a play structure because there is a new state mandate that needed to be met in health insurance or elsewhere. We could build that play structure, but with a penalty it would cost us twice as much and put us in further danger of not passing our budget.

I am extremely proud to be the Chair of the Marlboro School Board because we have a supportive community who turn out to vote on our budget and encourage robust discussion over programs and infrastructure. However, I cringe when I hear conversations in this committee and others about trusting districts to use their educational funds and not simply take a tax break. For representatives who think that on this committee or others, I invite you to attend or watch one of our school Board meetings. Instead of a tax break request from the community, I would expect a line of Marlboro community members lobbying the school board to bring back so much programming that has been lost, or add in more literacy supports; I definitely expect a community member to say: “please move the art room out of the basement storage facility. And while you’re at it, bring back the FTEs you cut in art.”

As I said at the beginning of this testimony, Marlboro is far from the only school that struggles to raise funds the way other schools do. In fact, the majority of Windham County districts have been underweighted these last 20+ years. Many districts that are over-weighted in our supervisory unions support implementing the weights, too. The reason: the students are all of our students. Marlboro (an underweighted district) will see its students eventually travel to Brattleboro and beyond for high school, similarly, Dover (an overweighed district) will see its students travel to Leland and Gray and beyond. However, BOTH districts believe that a strong elementary education is the key to success in secondary schooling and are in favor of implementing the weights because they understand we need to work together on this for the long-term growth of our students.

While I am happy to be here today with my colleague in the Coalition for Vermont Student Equity, I wish there was no need for a coalition. It took us a year to organize and our membership is growing each month – especially as community members become aware of the fix that stands before you and that it impacts a majority of districts. I thank you all very much for the opportunity to share how this inequity has impacted my district.

S.13:

This is being called “an implementation task force”, the clear implication being that it is a task force to create an implementation plan for the updated weights. The intent of the bill says that the “General Assembly has chosen to develop a phased approach to revising the weighting formula.” This bill language doesn’t reflect this intent. As it is written now, S.13 is simply another summer study.

The work of the taskforce created in S.13 must be limited to considering only how to implement the updated weights as recommended in the Pupil Weighting Factors Report. The legislature’s plan for additional action must be limited to considering and voting on the implementation plan created by the taskforce to update the weights. The is task force needs to come up with an implementation plan and the legislature will still need to come back to approve it. This bill doesn’t guarantee that the legislature will do anything. They can still come back next year and thoughtfully consider it. What this bill does is assure your constituents, many who are very upset

by our inaction for so long, that there is real work being done to create a plan to do this should the legislature decide to approve the plan next year.

Regarding Categorical Aid:

- Categorical aid is not equity, as it complicates the formulas and makes it hard to measure differences in student spending need throughout the state
- Categorical aid is not equity, as it allows for local agency and flexibility in spending decisions for some districts and not others. It also adds administrative expenses to the most struggling districts.
- Stakeholders universally oppose continuing with making up for funding inequities through the small schools grants and favor rolling them into weights, why would we be expanding this type of system when stakeholders all say we should be eliminating it?
- Categorical aid is not equity because it is still disproportionately placing the taxpayer burden on underweighted districts to contribute taxes into categorical aid, which otherwise should have been money that just belonged to them from the weights.

UVM is the only consultant qualified to assist with the implementation plan. S.13 must be amended to assign this role to the researchers who worked on the 2019 Pupil Weighting Factors Report. Underweighted school districts are overtaxed and underfunded. With less taxing capacity to provide for the basic needs of students, underweighted districts are more likely to exceed the spending threshold. While the taskforce considers the best path forward, we must offer immediate relief to communities that are hurting by suspending the excess spending threshold.

Since the Act 46 mergers, the simulator is nearly unusable. In order to create and implement a thoughtful approach to updating the weights, Vermonters must have access to accurate data that reflects the actual changes they will experience when the pupil weights are updated. The simulator must be updated this year.

Because certain districts have been harmed by a lack of taxing capacity, and because the current stakeholder group in S.13 doesn't immediately represent underfunded districts, we ask that the Coalition for Vermont Student Equity be added to the group of stakeholders outlined in S.13 to ensure harmed districts have a seat at the table.

If public meetings are to be held, we ask that at least two occur in historically underweighted districts. We feel it's critical that a false equivalence not be drawn between what underweighted districts are facing under an inequitable system now, and what overweighted districts will face after equity is created in the formula. Creating real equity requires listening to those who have been historically harmed by inequitable systems.