



Kingdom East School District

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Jennifer Botzojorns, Superintendent
Kingdom East School District

House Education Testimony

4/21/21

Thank you for inviting me to testify.

Good Morning. I serve as superintendent for the rural remote Kingdom East school district in the Northeast Kingdom. My prior work was at Mt. Mansfield School District in Chittenden County, Montpelier School District and two independent schools.

I want to begin by saying the weighting study has been completed. It is clear. If you review the appendices and the related algorithms - formulas from a multitude of states, using categorical aid, weights, this work has already been analysed. It is completed. It is done.

What is not needed is more analysis of the same information. What is needed is how to re-create a funding system in Vermont that is equitable for all children.

Concerning S-13

My reading of S-13 is that it wants to determine how various scenarios will specifically impact each local region (their categorical aid, local tax rates, weights). My hope is that the same weighting study research is not re-created. The risk with this work of prolonging the decisions via a task force and subsequent public meetings become a land grab based on each district's best interests (and their resources to lobby). Our current system shows how that ends.

My recommendation:

1. The first step of the Task Force must be clearly stating the objectives of equity. Clearly what does this mean? Do we want the children in Concord and Sutton to have the same doors open and opportunities for their future as Norwich or Shelburne? Answer these questions specifically. First.
2. There needs to be a specific connection and segue between student outcomes and the fiscal investments, specifically how the two overlap.
3. When reviewing property taxes, other regional influences need to be considered. For example a statewide teacher's agreement. Any statewide health insurance disproportionately impacts our district - 20% of the co-pay deducted from a \$10,000

more salary impacts employees differently. This goes beyond the simple taxing capacity. Dig deeper than simply tax carrying capacity.

4. For the transition, to new weights or categorical aid, outlay a specific timeline.
5. Concerning how tuition rates for non-operating school districts and career technical centers should be adjusted to account for the cost of educating students as reflected in the recommended weights or categorical aid: I do not think you can adjust tuition rates of independent schools, there should be a compensation for districts that have not choice but to tuition.
6. Consider school funding formulas in other states and alternative models for school funding; This was done in the weighting study. I do not recommend re-doing this weighting study work but rather take the next step.
7. When considering the impact of the recommended weights or categorical aid ongoing physical plant needs, capital expense and infrastructure must be included.
8. Public meetings need to be in different regions, and contextualized with the ability and capacity for the current regions to attend, lobby and promote their own interests.

In general these 8 recommendations are based on ensuring equity in the procesas and the outcome of the task force, and drilling into specific information essential to make wise funding formula proposals.

ESSR Funds:

We have ESSR funds planned for a robust summer program with outdoor, academic, recreation and arts activities. We hired a separate person to run this who will work with all of our afterschool programs.

For ESSR II we have a team that is looking at, in general, the following:

- Social emotional needs
- Enrichment needs arts, music
- academic needs - tutoring, interventionists
- facilities needs
- Transportation so students can participate in after school programming.

The work is hard because there is a sense of a "land grab" frothing at the mouth, for funds, as we have been so under-resourced for so long.

Statewide, if folks are in the weeds just looking at our feet, not at the horizon and sunrise -- long term impact and structural changes, nothing sticks. Money is done in a few years and poof, programs done... back to square one.

ESSR and the funding formula are an opportunity to change the way we envision and deliver our system of education. I fear that the important visionary long range planning will get gobbled up by the immediate needs due to years or lack of resources.

There are inordinate amounts of stress associated with this past year, present, past and ongoing, the predilection to lean into just-now fixes could be challenging in the long run.

Concerning the Weighting Study itself and the current inequities:

Examples of the struggles our rural and high poverty communities face.

1. Attrition.

In 2019- 5 of our rural schools had approximately 20% teacher attrition rates. 20% of our teachers left at the end of the year. Teachers come to our district, obtain experience, then leave because a spouse cannot find work, they want access to more amenities and activities or they seek higher paying positions. Imagine your workplace, or even the legislature, 20% leaving each year. This has a significant impact on our ability for deep consistent strong academic programs for our children, it compromises relationships in our schools, it impacts school culture. If we choose to wait or to not implement the new weights, our children will continue to see turnover in their schools -- and the inequity and harm will continue.

2. Academics

This school year our professional staff have 32 emergency or provisional licenses. 7 of these provisional licenses are in middle school math or science. In some schools, one teacher teaches 5th, 6th and 7th grade math and science. Teachers who work teaching 6 preparations, in two content areas, are exhausted. We can not pay for smaller class sizes to support grade level learning. In more affluent communities, an AP Art or AP French class occurs with 8 or 9 students. We can not afford such small classes for even the core content in middle school. This leads to an Achievement or Opportunity Gap - implementing the weighting study will allow us to provide more resources to support our children who need and want to be mathematicians and scientists.

3. Facilities

Over time the tight budgets have resulted in neglected facilities. In 3 of our schools we had no ventilation. We have sewage ejector pumps in classrooms, so the gray water does not back up. Two of our schools have 20 + year old mobile temporary classrooms to house some of our students -- but they have been there for over 20 years. The existing weights are arbitrary and do not consider the actual cost for educating children with disparate needs or operating schools in different contexts. The current system is inequitable and must be corrected. This cannot wait.

Whether teacher attrition, facilities, teacher quality and preparation -- being rural means that there are simply not as many resources. The current system penalizes students depending on where they live. The Vermont Constitution states that every child must be afforded substantially equal access to a quality basic education. This is not the case. In this point in history when our nation is grappling with inequities, it is our duty to take action on the weighting study. This year.

Our children can not wait. They deserve the same opportunities available to all children in Vermont so they can reach their full potential.

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This morning I overheard my Facilities Manager talking to a custodian. There is water seeping out of a wall. A concrete wall. It ends up all the pipes are copper and have oxidized, with the material in the wall, so the whole wall needs to be removed. I have testified here in the past, and there is absolutely no way that some of the conditions, resources, and opportunities in the district where I serve are equitable to other regions of the state. I can assure you that

Thank you for your ongoing work - I appreciate your attention to these matters.