



VERMONT PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION
MEMO

From the Desk of Jay Nichols

To: Senate Education
Date: March 10, 2021

Testimony: S.13 Equalized Pupils Implementation

General Weighting Comments:

My first thoughts on implementation of new weights for the purpose of trying to make sure the education funding formula supports the fundamental principles of the Brigham decision in terms of providing equity of opportunity for all students are as follows:

1. We agree with the findings of the Pupil Weighting Factors Report of December 24, 2019 produced by the research team led by UVM Professor Tammy Kolbe.
2. Be Quick, but; Don't Hurry. You want it bad you may get it bad! Having a system in place that takes steps over the period of a few years that is phased in is not necessarily a bad thing. Equally important, we need to make sure that whatever this new education funding system looks like we are willing to tinker with it over time as new data becomes available.
3. If you believe the validity of the points made in the UVM study regarding weights, which I do, especially around poverty weighting, there is a moral imperative to act. I personally think the study is extremely well done.
4. Thoughts on Perspectives shared for study:
 - a. I agree the current weighting process is outdated; additionally, I know of no research data that supports the formulation of the current weights which I believe appeared in the education finance formula over 30 years ago.
 - b. I have been a critic of previous small schools grants and feel that the state, in many cases, has unnecessarily provided grants to schools that were not really geographically isolated and all of us have paid extra for inefficiencies that have also, in some cases, reduced student opportunities.
 - c. VPA believes that Early Childhood students should be counted in proportion to the amount of time they spend in the school. A full day ADM should be used when a school has a full-day early childhood program. This would serve as an incentive to increase Pre-K – something all research supports doing

- d. Like other interviewees in the weighting study, I too, worry that districts who may receive extra spending capacity without raising their tax rates may instead use this as a tax break and not provide funding to increase opportunities to students or to improve deterioration of facilities due to lack of preventive maintenance. Now we all understand that many of our facilities need upgrade. I just don't want to see this coming instead of providing more opportunities and resources for students in poorer communities who have been underserved by our current funding model
- 5. Recommended Cost Factors and Weights
 - a. I believe the five cost factors are the right five: student economic disadvantage, ELL students, Middle & Secondary students, Geographically Necessary Schools, Population Density
 - i. Student economic disadvantage
 - 1. Ton of research connecting poverty to adverse learning, test scores, etc.
 - 2. Many of us have believed for years that the weighting for poverty has not been tied to any realistic economic indicator of the extra financial support necessary to support students in poverty in our schools
 - 3. This is a HUGE change and by itself will create a feeling of "winners" and "losers" we need to make sure we fully understand the impact
 - ii. ELL students
 - 1. Obviously, more resources are needed to support students for whom English is not their first language. In fact, a number of our ELL students arrive in Vermont with no understanding of English and/or might not be literate in their native language
 - iii. Middle & Secondary
 - 1. This is largely due to increased licensing needs for content that is required in middle and secondary schools
 - iv. Geographically Necessary Schools
 - 1. We need to clearly define what geographically necessary means
 - 2. We should examine this in the context of Act 46, declining enrollment, increasing expectations of schools, substandard facilities
 - v. Population Density
 - 1. More dense populations tend to have better resources that schools and families can draw upon
 - 2. Conversely, less densely populated places tend to have less resources and an increased extra burden of transportation to services
 - 3. Hopefully, population density can allow us to have a more reliable metric and we can move away from the concept of small school grants
- 6. Act 173/Students with Disabilities connection to Weighting Study

- a. In keeping with Act 173, and the expectation of high quality implementation of this law, I believe that the weights in the report should be without students with disabilities counted should the weighting study be implemented. I believe this is more consistent with the Census Block Grant approach of 173.
- 7. The legislature needs to understand the details of the weighting study and what implementation would look like and what the impact would be across the state
- 8. People will look at this from a winners and losers perspective. It is impossible not to. However, I remind everyone that the children of the state are all Vermont's children. We need to look at this through the lens of fairness to our students. How can we implement a funding formula change that is based on actual resources and do so in a way that provides better opportunities for our children who have been previously underserved?
- 9. Finally, any legislative action as a result of the weighting report needs to consider the dynamic and complex education public policy initiative-laden whirlwind our schools currently exist within: Flexible Pathways, Early Childhood education, Act 173 (Census-Based Special Education funding and delivery model), Act 46, and oh yeah ... a global pandemic. Let's make sure we take necessary action that is thoughtful and well planned out – again, be quick but don't hurry.

Specific Comments on S.13 Original:

- 1. The Senate Bill S. 13 talks about the Agency of Education undertaking a study and designing an implementation plan. I don't have a problem with this. However, if this is going to occur, we need to make sure the Agency has the resources to do so. It may be worth considering allowing the AOE to contract out this work or partner with some other entity. I do think the General Assembly needs to have ultimate ownership over the implementation of the weighting study
- 2. S. 13 asks the AOE to collaborate with VPA and other organizations. I respectfully ask that this language changes to "consults" with. I do not think VPA or any other membership driven organization should have an official role in implementing the Weighting Study because we have members that are affected in many different ways

S.13 1.1 Specific Comments

- 1. A Task Force created to implement the Pupil Weighting Factors Report makes sense to me.
- 2. I think you have the right members/positions for the Task Force. Both the Administration (through State Board and AOE representation) and the General Assembly are taking the responsibility which is appropriate.
- 3. Looking at categorical aid options instead of, or in addition to, some weighting factors is fair to investigate. I think this should be especially looked at in terms of non-traditional roles that schools are being required to fulfill through the education fund such as mental health support services

4. Having consulting support makes sense
5. It will be important to have comprehensive input from all stakeholder representatives related to each of the duties of the Task Force
6. I don't have a problem with the work being done by the end of six meetings but question if that is possible given the host of responsibilities set out in this bill
7. Hire a really good consultant!

One last thought to think about:

Roughly 80% of costs in public education can be attributed to staff compensation in one form or another. Public Education is a human capital intensive endeavor. In general, many of the districts that will experience increased tax burden upon implementation of a new weighting system will also be systems that on average pay more for personnel than many of the systems that will be benefactors of a change. I don't have any specific recommendation about this but just feel it is something that needs to be considered.