

Dear Members of the Senate Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee yesterday with respect to S.13. We wish to extend our appreciation to each of you for the thoughtful consideration that you are giving to S.13 and the implementation of the recommendations of the Weighting Study.

We also want to let you know that our Associations are in the process of reviewing (and following the testimony on) S.100 - Requirement to Make School Meals Available to All Students. We have already conducted one meeting with a group of local school officials and are currently using their input to develop formal testimony to share with the Committee. We are also conferring with our respective members in other ways.

We do not want to see more time pass however, without sharing with each of you a very significant concern.

As currently written, S.100 would require every school district to include the cost of providing meals to all students within its local school district budget. The fiscal note that you have been provided by the Joint Fiscal Office estimates the total additional statewide cost of this requirement at between \$24 million dollars and \$40 million annually. An increase of that magnitude in the State's Education Spending more than justifies the serious policy deliberations that you are engaging in.

Our most pressing concern regarding the bill as written is that it would require every district to budget locally for the increased costs associated with a new state policy. That requirement would undeniably add substantial and significant budget pressure to local school districts.

In general and on average, at a cost of \$24 million, given Vermont's approximate 87,000 equalized pupils, the annual per student cost would be \$275 - so a district with one thousand equalized pupils would see a budget increase of an estimated \$275,000 per year. At \$40 million the cost would be \$460 per student - adding \$460,000 to a local school district budget. In the context of local school district budgeting these would be impactful and concerning increases.

Significantly, if the provision of universal school meals is a state requirement and if a budget proposal was rejected by the local electorate (which some are every year), the district would have no choice but to make cuts in other areas because as a state mandate the obligation for universal meals would be off limits. This is the definition of an unfunded mandate. In fact, the addition of this mandatory requirement falls into the category of unfunded mandate, regardless of whether a local budget is approved or rejected.

Irrespective of testimony that we may offer related to other provisions of the bill, we urge the Committee to consider ways in which the State could fund this program in a manner that doesn't impact local budgets and local budget voting. For example, if the policy of statewide universal meals is supported by the General Assembly, then the funding mechanism should be either from the General Fund or through a specific, targeted Education Fund allocation.

Please consider the negative and impactful effect that the contemplated fiscal mechanism for this state policy would have if 115 local school districts were required to approve the funds to pay for it, one budget at a time.

As noted above, we expect to have detailed comments on other aspects of the bill and are working with local school officials to refine that input.

We want to emphasize that we are fully supportive of good nutrition and the provision of nutritious meals through schools - our concerns go to the total costs, mechanics and funding associated with the approaches contemplated in S.100.

Thank you.

Best,

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