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Pupil Weighting Testimony

Submitted To: The Senate Committee on Education and the Senate Committee on Finance

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First, I'd like to thank the Senate Education Committee and Senate Finance Committee for giving me the opportunity to offer this testimony on behalf of the Student Weighting Coalition, a coalition of school districts/supervisory unions from all over the state. A coalition that unites both urban and rural areas together on an issue that we believe ensures a healthy and viable future for Vermont. I am here speaking to you about the implementation this legislative session of the recommendations made in the Pupil Weighting Factors Report.

Even though the examples I give today are based on my personal experiences as a Winooski school board member, I am here to speak to you as a fellow Vermonter. I am pleading with you, our state legislators, to come together and support the implementation the Pupil Weighting Factors Report recommendations. Vermonters are defined by our passion for equity and a strong democracy. A democracy that can only be nourished and strengthened by an educated populace.

This democracy that we cherish is threatened by the inequities of our educational funding formula. No doubt, we had an inkling that there are cracks to what we hoped to achieve and be, because of our current education funding formula. It was only a few years ago that legislators commissioned a study that was completed by esteemed University of Vermont Professor Tammy Kolbe and her research team. The research team used data to highlight what many already suspected: It costs more to educate certain types of students.

I recognize that sometimes it is difficult to grasp a study when only looking at it from a numbers' perspective. So, let's talk about the real life examples that bring these numbers to life. When I joined the board in 2017, I could quickly see that we had a vibrant school district. A district where administrators, teachers, and staff embraced an education that would prepare our students for the knowledge economy of today and tomorrow. Generational poverty, though, exists in our city and creates barriers that prevent our students from reaching their full potential. Generational poverty means that our school district not only needs to consider how to educate our students but also how to feed them and how to provide them with healthcare. We believe that all of our students deserve to lead healthy, productive and successful lives and that this will help them to better engage with their local and global community.

Because of many of our families' circumstances, they often cannot afford the luxury of taking time off from work to go to the doctors. Truthfully, they don't even have time to drop their children off at school, which seems trivial until you realize our school district cannot afford year-round busing. And this was a choice we made as a school board, because we thought it was a better investment to renovate and expand our school building. A building that was built to house only 600 students, when we had 800. We were using closets to hold special education sessions. A building that with every passing year, we hoped that our 1955 boiler would last another season, because replacing it would be cost prohibitive as repairs meant E-baying parts with hopes that other schools had decommissioned their old boiler.

You may ask, why not add everything that is needed into our budget? The answer is simple. Our taxes would skyrocket, and our school budget would not have a chance of passing a city vote. I also made a promise when I joined the school board that I would not design a school budget that would lead to gentrification. I wanted to make sure the school we were building and the district we were becoming would continue to be a home for the current residents. Little did I know, the tough choices we were

making as a board were directly caused by the inequities in a school funding formula that was created in the 1990's. I promise you the world has changed a lot since then. My smartphone now is much more powerful than the computer I had in college.

I highlight the notion of change, because Vermont is also changing. We are enriched by the New Americans who have settled into our state and I am fortunate enough to live in a city that is home to many of them. If we are to truly integrate and benefit from the diversity these families bring, then as a school district we needed to invest extra resources into our educational system. This allows us to build a stronger community. The obvious investment is in our English as a Second Language program. Some see this as a burden, but I see this as an investment. Once these families learn to communicate in our common language of English, we see their brilliance. Many of our New Americans speak more than one language and have ideas that are new to us. And more importantly, they share with us their perseverance and grit. I have been fortunate enough to mentor two New Americans and I can already see the investment in them paying off. One of them even has dreams of becoming governor of Vermont. (Today he is doing his college interview with Yale in my home because he was worried about having a stable internet connection).

The other investment is in our cultural liaisons. These liaisons help us build a community where all families can support and take part in their children's education. A fact that is often taken for granted by many of us. Our cultural liaisons do more than translate and ensure constant communication between parents and our schools. They also help build trust between the New American population and the government. We have to remember many of them were exiled from their countries because they were vocal about their government. Regardless of us welcoming them to our country, it doesn't take a leap of faith as to understand why they don't trust government.

This was made evident when two of our students made a [music video](#), "Let's go to School!" in Swahili, their native language. This song was about how Vermont gave them an opportunity for a better life. When Representative Welch wanted to meet these students, which for many of us is an honor, it took our cultural liaisons several hours to convince their parents to let them meet him. They feared that having a governmental official know them would mean future trouble. I actually do not blame them for feeling this way, because of their past experiences with government. I am fortunate that they trust our schools and slowly stronger bonds are formed between them and the community at large. This is not meant to be a complaint, but an illustration of reality. I cannot emphasize enough, we want these families here, because they enrich our community. Thus, our cultural liaisons, who have teaching degrees from their home countries, are worthwhile investments for our schools and city. And truthfully, I hope there are ways for us to increase their salaries, because they are woefully underpaid. Having a formula that is not equitable, means we depend on people's generosity and kindness and we hope it is enough to cover what should be provided by our state.

A funding formula that is inequitable causes school district to be reactive to problems instead of being proactive and strategic. I am proud of what our school district has done with the constraints the funding formula has placed on us. The current weight says we have about 1000 equalized pupils – but with the new weights we would have 1600 equalized pupils. Imagine what more we could do if we did not have such limitations. There is a reason 62% of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch in our district. Their families cannot afford to live anywhere else. Yet instead of shunning them – we embrace the challenges. Please allow the districts that are willing to accept these challenges be given a fair chance to educate their students.

I know this is going to be hard work to implement especially as we continue to deal with the pandemic and its fallout. But the pandemic was the ultimate stress test of our systems, and it highlighted even more of the inequities of our educational system. I also know that Vermonters never run away from things that seem difficult. Instead, we steer into it and roll up our sleeves and fix what needs to be fixed. This is your chance to fix inequities that have been made much worse by the pandemic.

I want to acknowledge the students in Winooski, who are teaching school board members how to create an anti-racist school district. One of many lessons learned from them is that it is imperative as adults, we stand up when we see inequities, especially inequities that affect them. I picked examples today of people who are often voiceless and cannot be here to advocate for themselves. I hope I did them right by being their advocate.

Many of our students start their morning by pledging allegiance to the United States. A nation they believe to be indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. Let's work together and make this a reality for our children. Let's stand up and fight for equity and equality by passing legislation this session to implement the new, empirically derived weights. Do this now, because building an equitable education system allows us to continue having a government that is of the people, by the people, for the people. Doing this now means that we truly care for those who do not have a voice.

It's rare when there is legislation that can unite so many of us. But this legislation and this need to act unites the Northeast Kingdom with Bennington, Burlington/Winooski with Rutland, and Montpelier with Windham County. To not take up this bill will be a moral failure on us all. It will signal to our children that we do not care. And if that is the case, then the values that I thought embodied what it means to be Vermonter were false.

Let's be leaders and work to make a better and more equitable Vermont, where our children's future is not dictated by where they live. Let's do this now.

Thank you.

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