

Vermont Senate Testimony
Public School Funding “Weighting Reform”
February 23, 2021

Equitable Education Advocates
Vicki Capitani, Chair
Dover Select Board

My name is Vicki Capitani and I am here to urge you to take immediate action to fix the broken education finance system because it is unfair to rural and economically disadvantaged students.

First a little background. I am a native Vermonter and was educated in our local school system. I am the co owner of The Deerfield Valley News with my husband Randy. I served on the school board for 9 years and am currently in my 10th year on the select board. I have been involved in local education governance for decades at both the state and local level. This is my third time testifying in the statehouse. I am a passionate advocate for equitable quality education for our children.

The statewide education reforms over the past 20 plus years significantly impacted our region. We have been very engaged in order to offer the best education possible for our local kids. Unfortunately, the system has left high poverty and rural districts underfunded. Our students are left withering on the vine. The promise of Brigham has not happened, in fact as the Legislature’s Weighting study conducted by UVM has shown that the inequities have been shifted. Rural and poor students have suffered.

For us, this is not about the pain of an increased tax bill and we are not here to seek reduced taxes. We are here to advocate for the quality education for our students.

Our region has done everything you have asked:

- We started Act 46 mergers before the mandate and followed through.
- We joined the statewide insurance system, we constantly seek out special grants,
- Our focus has always been on quality.

The results are not what we all hoped. In fact, we are going backwards now. The way the funding has been allocated has not been equitable. Penalties punish our communities for trying to provide for students, only compounding the problem. Programs are cut, maintenance is deferred, and our children suffer.

Here are some examples of the negative impacts:

- almost no AP classes for high school students

- inadequate student transportation services
- unequal access to language classes
- deferred maintenance and inferior school facilities
- test scores falling behind

*What is causing this? Looking at the numbers revealed in the Legislature's Weighting Study, we see: (these numbers come directly from the Weighting study simulator, hosted on the AOE website)

The legislature has failed to recognize the difference in cost per pupil for educating students in poverty, in geographically necessary rural and small schools, for English language learners – for more than two decades.

I'm going to give you some examples. Please keep in mind when you are listening to these examples that an underweighted district has higher per pupil spending calculation than they should, and an overweighted district has a lower per pupil spending calculation than they should.

When we look at the 2018 data provided as part of this study, we see that almost all of the rural isolated mountain school districts surrounding the Town of Dover are underweighted, meaning these districts have either:

1. not had access to equitable resources to educate their students
2. their taxpayers have been paying MORE to provide equitable resources (in violation of Brigham)
3. or likely, a little of both.

Using the corrected weights, the equalized pupil count in 2018 in

- Wardsboro – a district we merged with in 2019, was underweighted by 10% on their equalized pupils, meaning instead of 116 students, Wardsboro should have been calculated at 129 students, and difference of 13 students too low.

- Readsboro was underweighted by 28%, they were counted as having 75 students, 30 less than when properly weighted at 105.

- Jamaica's was underweighted by 22%, 59 instead of 75, 16 students too low.

These are some of our neighboring elementary schools. When students from these schools then go on to high school, we can see the problem is then being compounded. For instance,

- in Brattleboro, the equalized pupil counts are underweighted by 15%, 1101 students, instead of 1298, a difference of 197.

- in Bennington at Mount Anthony we can see the equalized pupil counts are underweighted by 14%.

In Chittenden County we can see from the analysis that districts like Essex and Mount Mansfield are 20% and 25% overweighted for their equalized pupil counts, while Burlington and Winooski are 15% and almost 40% underweighted.

By failing to correct this twenty year old educational injustice, you are incentivizing more spending on students who cost less to educate, the overweighted districts. At the same time underweighted districts, are incentivized to spend less on students who cost more to educate.

Our schools are not only the heart of our communities, but they are also the catalyst for our local economy because they bring young people and life to our region.

We are asking you to act now to correct these longstanding inequities. Our schools and communities do not have time to spare. We are on the brink of collapse. We are looking to you to turn this ship around and stop this financial race to the bottom.

Thank you.