

January 21, 2022

Chair Campion, Senators, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Marc Schaubert. I'm the Executive Director of The Coalition for Vermont Student Equity. We are a non-profit that was formed a little over a year ago by a group of Vermont school board directors out of frustration with the lack of progress on the implementation of the recommendations from the Pupil Weighting Factors Report.

We currently have 25 member districts from disparate parts of Vermont. Our member districts range from small and rural, like Marlboro in the south and Troy in the North, to large and urban like Burlington and Winooski in the west and Windham Southeast in the east. We have member districts from 11 counties, representing 80 cities and towns, and over 19,000 students. While most of our member districts are currently underweight, we do have some, such as my own home town of Dover, the Washington Central School District and the Peacham School District, that are overweight. They have joined us because they believe that equity ultimately benefits everyone.

Like yourselves, our members are passionate about education and devoted to making sure all of Vermont's children receive the quality education that we are morally and constitutionally required to provide. We are all volunteers and working for the shared goal of securing the promise made a quarter century ago by Brigham and Act 60, a truly equitable education funding formula.

Since I was invited to speak about ELL, I won't let myself go off on a tangent and talk about the Reverse Foundation Formula, also known as the 'Cost Equity Formula.' But I'd be happy to come back anytime to discuss the merits of the pupil weighting formula over a complete overhaul of our education funding system with who knows how many unknown unknowns.

Our existing pupil weighting formula is a fair and equitable formula when correct data along with sophisticated math and statistics, which are way above my paygrade, are used to determine the factors and coefficients utilized. I'm here today to ask you to correct our formula and not reinvent the wheel.

While Winooski and Burlington, who currently have the bulk of ELL students in the state, are members of the Coalition, we also have members that fit in the other two tranches you all were describing earlier this week. Whether we are talking about roughly 600 ELL students in Burlington, fewer than 50 in Barre or none in Cabot, all members of our Coalition are of one mind, funding for ELL should be maintained as a weight, but updated with the corrected value.

Our members don't see correcting the weights as producing winners and losers. We see correcting the weights as a way to stop the bleeding from our underweight districts that has

caused immeasurable harm to a generation of kids. We see correcting the weights as leveling the playing field so that regardless of where a child lives, they will receive the education they need and the district will have the taxing capacity it needs to provide said education. We see correcting the weights as built-in workforce development and an economic driver for Vermont.

Vermont is not a one size fits all state. When one advocates for so-called Cost Equity Payments or categorical grants, they are making the decision that whether we're talking about Bennington, Winooski or Troy, the costs of educating an ELL student should be the same and if they aren't it's the local taxpayers that should make up the difference. That's antithetical to our system of a single shared pot of money. Costs are not the same in every corner of the state, for all size districts or for the different demographics across the state. As seen in the Jan 12 memo from Professor Kolbe and her team, the calculated cost equivalencies are averages from across the state. Applying a single dollar value for all ELL students would be inherently inequitable and a step backwards from our current system of weights based on actual needs and costs.

When Senator Hardy was in your committee the other day, she briefly mentioned the possibility of a hybrid approach. The Coalition could get behind a system that implements the recommended corrected weights by Professor Kolbe and her team, along with a grant program on top of it for districts with low incidence of ELL students and insufficient resources to provide the federally required level of education. Such a hybrid approach would satisfy concerns regarding greater funding needs for low incidence ELL districts, while also not adding work to our currently underweight, overworked and understaffed business offices that would be required to apply for, manage, and report on grants in order to justify their spending.

That said, as we read through Professor Kolbe's Jan 12 memo and started evaluating what the cost equivalency for ELL would mean to those of us on the ground, we noticed an interesting phenomena... We'd ask that you consider that the weights very well allow the necessary funding for low incidence ELL districts.

Let's start with the premise that the research, results and recommendations by Professor Kolbe and her team in the Pupil Weighting Factors Report of 2019 and subsequent memoranda responding to questions posed by The Task Force on the Implementation of the Pupil Weighting Factors Report, is accurate, reliable and good science. Table 1 of the Jan 12 memo gives us an ELL cost equivalency of \$25,335. If we take my district, River Valleys Unified School District, as an example, with 3 ELL students... Then under a grant program, assuming the empirically derived cost equivalencies were used, RVUSD would receive a grant for \$76k. Since the same data was used to derive the weights and the cost equivalencies, it would reason that under the weighting model, where recommended weights are implemented, RVUSD would also receive roughly \$76k. So I fail to see how a grant would provide districts with low incidence ELL with greater resources than the weights.



Let's talk about the elephant in the room for a minute: Regardless of the intent, the proposal to change ELL from a weight to a grant and choosing a separate funding mechanism for ELL students from funding for all other students, results in discrimination against ELL students on the basis of national origin and language.

I'd like to draw your attention to the difference between equity and equality. To quote Merriam-Webster dictionary, *"Equity is often related to justice or proportional fairness. Equality differs from equity in that it relates more to sameness or equal distribution. In society, equal treatment does not always produce an equitable result."*

Grants, whether categorical or in the form of cost equity payments, achieve equality, not equity. In order to achieve a system of *"substantially equal educational opportunities"* we must have equity... which we will achieve by correcting our existing funding formula but would fail to do so with a system of grants.

Thank you for this opportunity to share some thoughts with your committee. You have some difficult decisions to make and I don't envy you. During your discussions, please keep in the front of your mind the more than 80k students in Vermont and to borrow the motto of the Taconic and Green School District, *"all our children are all our children."*

One last quote, if I may, that I hope will help guide you in making these difficult decisions... Ruth Bader Ginsburg once said, *"to those accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression."*