



WINOOSKI SCHOOLS

We are the future.

To: Senate Committee on Education
From: Nicole Mace, Finance Manager
Re: Pupil Weighting: ELL Categorical Aid Proposal
Date: January 19, 2022

Good afternoon. My name is Nicole Mace and I am the Finance Manager for the Winooski School District.

The UVM Study on Pupil Weighting Factors clarified the extent of the gap between the resources available to Winooski students and their needs. In the Winooski School District, 62% of our students live in poverty. 35% of our students are multilingual learners. 29% of our students qualify for special education services. The UVM Study illustrates that the current funding weights are not keeping pace with the needs of our students, and do not reflect the actual costs we incorporate into our local budget.

The pandemic illuminated the dire need for greater investments to better serve our students. Winooski made the decision to invest federal COVID funds in increased ELL staffing and interventionists. Using one-time funds to staff programs is inherently risky, but the needs of our students and families are so substantial that we felt we must use the funds the way they were intended - to support vulnerable populations in our community. These positions include:

- Three liaison/interpreter positions
- Two ELL teacher positions
- One ELL intake and family engagement coordinator

Additional ESSER-funded positions include elementary literacy and math interventionists (one each), one HS reading interventionist, one elementary behavior interventionist. These positions support ELL students in addition to other students who have been identified as in need of additional support.

Unfortunately, when the federal funding goes away, the staffing will as well. This outcome could be avoided if the legislature corrects the weights. Because we do not weight students accurately, Winooski has the second highest spending per student in

Chittenden County, just behind Burlington. Winooski also has the highest tax rate in the County, but the lowest median household income. Despite such high tax rates, Winooski has the lowest starting teacher salary in Chittenden County. This means we often lose teachers to higher paying districts after they start their careers in the District.

The Winooski School District does not support the ELL categorical aid proposal recommended by the Task Force for the following reasons:

- The UVM researchers applied a research-based, empirical approach to correcting the weights. It is not clear what empirical basis would be used to determine how to establish categorical aid amounts, which would subject funding for high needs districts like Winooski to a political and uncertain process.
- The Task Force accepted all UVM-recommended weights that have been empirically derived with **the sole exception of ELL weights.**
- The Task Force has recommended replacing ELL weights with a categorical grant program that would provide \$5,000 for every ELL student. This amount was developed based on past spending by Vermont districts and other states' ELL grant programs, and does not reflect the investments needed to adequately support these learners. As noted in Professor Kolbe's January 11, 2022 memo: "ELL adjustments contained in most contemporary state school funding policies are not cost based and instead reflect legacy policy or were politically derived."
- Having decided to update weights to reflect empirically-derived recommendations, the Task Force/Legislature cannot decide to treat ELL students differently and in a manner that makes it more difficult for English Language Learners to access and spend state education dollars. The chart below illustrates this discrepancy:

Pupil Category	Additional Resources Provided by Recommended Weights	Resources Recommended by Pupil Weighting Factors Task Force
Students in Poverty	\$10,480	\$10,480
High School Students	\$3,968	\$3,968
ELL Students	\$25,335	\$5,000
Schools < 100 Students	\$2,137	\$2,137
Districts w/ 55-100 persons sq/mile	\$712	\$712



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In 1997, the Vermont Supreme Court found in *Brigham* that under the Vermont Constitution, education was a fundamental right, stating, “in Vermont, the right to education is so integral to our constitutional form of government ... that any statutory framework that infringes upon the equal enjoyment of that right bears a commensurate heavy burden of justification.” Regardless of the intent behind the proposal, by choosing to segregate ELL funding from the rest of the formula, and knowingly setting the amount at substantially less than empirical analysis says it should be, I believe the Task Force’s proposal would result in discrimination against ELL students on the basis of race, national origin and language, and is a violation of VT’s Constitution.

The new poverty measure recommended by the Task Force also disadvantages Winooski because it excludes ELL learners from the poverty count, and relies on families completing FRL paperwork, which we currently do not require them to complete due to our high percentage of poverty, which makes us eligible for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). The CEP program makes it possible for us to provide breakfasts and lunches free to all students, regardless of their income status, because more than 40% of our student population receives SNAP nutrition benefits. So, in order for us to have all the paperwork completed in a timely way so that we get an accurate count of poverty in our community, we will have to hire more people to support multilingual families - translating the paperwork and having it completed.

Finally, I would like to address the Task Force’s recommendation to consider a new mechanism for funding education in Vermont using what Professor Kolbe refers to as the “Reverse Foundation Formula”. We have the following concerns/observations to share about the so-called “Cost Equity” approach, which would establish a common “cost per student”, based on average expenditures across the state. Some questions/concerns about this approach include:

- Since it is based on current average spending, it bakes existing inequities in spending into the new formula.
- It assumes that \$1 buys the same no matter where in the state you live.
- Impacts on the Education Fund have not been modeled, so it is not clear how this proposal would interact with existing homestead/income/non-residential rates.

- It continues to rely on a segregation of ELL students outside of the formula and providing \$5,000 per student as opposed to the \$25,000 called for by the weights.

Thank you.