

Hello. Thank you for your time, attention, and hard work on this important civil rights issue. I am Tom Flanagan, Superintendent of Burlington School District.

I know the question of how to create an equitable funding system is weighing heavily on the hearts and minds of many people in the state right now, and I appreciate the seriousness with which you are taking this decision. As such, I want to emphasize the potential impact of the decision and start off with a definition from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to underscore the risk.

“Institutional racism is distinguished from the explicit attitudes or racial bias of individuals by the existence of systematic policies or laws and practices that provide differential access to goods, services, and opportunities of society by race. Institutional racism results in data showing racial gaps across every system. For children and families it affects where they live, the quality of the education they receive, their income, types of food they have access to, their exposure to pollutants, whether they have access to clean air, clean water or adequate medical treatment, and the types of interactions they have with the criminal justice system.”

I know everyone in the room wants to ensure institutional racism is not perpetuated in our education funding system in Vermont, and I believe the way to do this is to implement the recommendations of the weighted pupil study.

Burlington School District is the largest single-city school district in the state. This year, we will serve more than 3,200 students from PreK through high school, including serving 256 students from the surrounding Districts at Burlington Technical Center. As of October 1st this year, 15% of our students were identified as English Learners and 38% are students of the global majority or students of color. 21% of our students are on IEP's and 50% of our students qualify for free and reduced-price lunches. Last year, students in BSD came from homes representing 36 different first languages. I want to let that point sink in a little. Last year, our students came to school after leaving homes with 36 different languages being spoken.

The primary languages spoken among our populations are Arabic, Chinese, French, Karen, Kirundi, Nepali, Swahili, Somali, Vietnamese, and Maay Maay, which is a spoken language only. We are grateful and blessed to have diversity of race, culture, thought, ability and language in Burlington. As a Superintendent, I know that this diversity benefits our entire student body and is helping bridge connections and create global citizenship among our students. As a parent with three children attending BSD schools, I love that my own daughters are thought partners and playmates with students from across the globe.

A few months ago I testified alongside Winooski Superintendent Sean McMannon, both of us in favor of implementing the weighted pupil recommendations put forth in the study completed by the American Institute of Research, Rutgers University, and The University of Vermont. This study was commissioned and paid for by the Vermont legislature and resulted in concrete recommendations provided by nationally recognized experts in their field. As I sit here today, I can tell you that I believe more strongly now than ever that it is time to implement the updated recommendations of this study.

Most importantly, these experts recommended updating the weighted pupil formula to provide more support for multilingual students who are English learners. Instead of simply recommending implementing that model, the Task Force on the Implementation of the Pupil Weighting Factors advanced a few options, including a proposal to provide categorical aid. I believe this proposal and the cost equity proposal would further the current inequities in the system and create unnecessary hardship for school districts.

Categorical aid comes with significant problems. First, it applies funding across the state in ways that do not account for the different needs of English learners and underfunds districts with concentrations of English learners compared to wealthier districts with fewer English learners. Second, it creates additional administrative lift for school districts that must report out on the usage of funds. And third, it doesn't allow for long-term planning and stability, as it is at risk of being cut each year. So not only is categorical aid inequitable, which I will get to in a moment, it creates unnecessary hardships and results in uncertainty, instability, and wasted resources.

The recent [memo](#) from Tammy Kolbe (University of Vermont), Bruce Baker (The Rutgers University), Drew Atchison, and Jesse Levin (both of the American Institutes for Research) estimates the additional per-pupil cost of education for an English Learner to be \$25,335, yet the Task Force proposes categorical funding of just \$5,000 per English Learner student after an initial \$25,000 allocation. This means that if a district has one English learner, they are essentially providing funding of \$30,000 per student. However, in Burlington, where we have nearly 500 English learners this year, it means an average funding amount of just \$5,050 per student, a difference of nearly \$25,000 per student that would be borne by Burlington taxpayers. As is apparent from the table linked in my testimony, categorical aid would exacerbate the problem that has existed since the original weights were adopted - the very problem that we are all trying to solve.

Cost Factor	Average Additional Per Pupil Cost Based on Empirical Analysis	ELL Categorical Aid
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 of 55-100 people/sq. mile	\$712	\$712

That said, I do believe this option was put forth in hopes of helping students in our district and others who have been historically underfunded like Burlington. However, the categorical aid and cost equity proposals would be examples of the system allowing the inequities to continue, instead of addressing the issues inherent in our broken funding formula. Categorical aid would fail to deliver on the promise of predictable, high-quality educational programming to support the children who bring so much inherent benefit to our state. If we fail to provide the funding needed to deliver high-quality education to English learners, then we would be directly responsible for reinforcing institutional racism.

And so I find myself testifying once again, asking and begging you to do the right thing. I am optimistic you will. Vermont has a history of doing the right thing, even before it is fashionable. From being the first state to bar slavery to advocating for marriage equality and working to reduce climate change, we've demonstrated, time and again, our commitment to justice and equity. This is another opportunity to stand on the right side of history, to be more than simply in favor of equity, this is an opportunity to be actively antiracist. Our state and our students need your courageous leadership.

This is a big decision that will impact the lives of our children for the next generation, and the community is watching closely. I am urging you to listen carefully and make the decision that is right for the students and communities who need you the most in this decision. Leading for Equity is hard, but I believe in you and Vermonters are counting on you. Please adopt the recommendations for the weighted study.

Thank you.