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Sent: Wednesday, February 16, 2022 8:40:51 AM
To: Ann Cummings <ACUMMINGS@leg.state.vt.us>; Mark MacDonald <MMacDonald@leg.state.vt.us>; Christopher Pearson <CPearson@leg.state.vt.us>; Randy Brock <RBrock@leg.state.vt.us>; Michael Sirotkin <msirotkin@leg.state.vt.us>; Christopher Bray <CBray@leg.state.vt.us>; Ruth Hardy <RHardy@leg.state.vt.us>
Cc: John Alberghini <john.alberghini@mmuusd.org>; Michelle Baker <mbaker@huusd.org>
Subject: Draft Bill on Pupil Weighting

Good Morning,

As the Senate Finance committee considers the pupil weighting factors and implementation of the Pupil Weighting Task Force recommendations I would like to bring to your attention a possible contradiction with this bill and the Universal Meals Task Force recommendations currently under consideration in the House Education Committee. My specific area of concern is the weight for poverty.

The poverty weighting has a very significant impact on each district's equalized pupil count, and I am pleased to see that the current data source will be discontinued. Currently poverty counts are defined by statute as children ages 6 through 17 living in a family unit receiving nutrition benefits (16 V.S.A. § 4001(8)). The Agency of Education (AOE) interprets this language to mean that children must reside in families receiving 3SquaresVT nutritional benefits through the Department for Children and Families (DCF). DCF provides counts to the AOE as of two specific dates annually – July 1 and December 1.

VASBO brought to your attention last March that the data reported in December 2019 and July 2020 seemed inconsistent with the actual demand experienced in our districts for free meals. A copy of that memo is attached.

During the pandemic the federal government has provided reimbursement for all students receiving school breakfast and lunch meals regardless of income status. Consequently schools are experiencing a decline in families who submit applications for free and/or reduced meals because the application is not needed to receive free meals. The reduced collection of free and reduced meal applications is affecting the free and reduced counts in school districts throughout Vermont. If legislation is passed on Universal Meals I expect the decline in family financial data collected by schools will escalate. Consequently I am relieved that the free and reduced meal counts are not being considered as the metric for school district poverty weights.

Your committee is currently considering some type of universal income declaration form that will determine the poverty weights. I would like to caution that this collection may also be incomplete, and not reflect the poverty within any given district because families will receive no direct benefit for filing this form. Much deliberation will be necessary to determine how to collect family income data in a fair manner that accurately reflects the poverty experienced in any given community. I am hopeful that your committee will research other data points that do not rely on voluntary participation by families.

Sincerely,

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