

Testimony on Drafting Request 22-0593 - Weighting Study

Testimony To: Senate Committee on Finance

Respectfully Submitted By: Daniel M. French, Ed.D., Secretary of Education

Date: February 16, 2022

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this draft language. I have organized my comments on the various provisions of the bill based on how they appear in the draft.

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 - Section 5 – Universal Income Declaration Form – I support this shift in policy. This will be a significant undertaking, however, and the agency will need additional resources to develop this form and to implement this new process at the state level. I have described that need in my comments on positions below.
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 - Determination of Weighted Membership – I would like more time to evaluate the impact of these proposed changes on each district. I also think this evaluation needs to occur in conjunction with modeling of district special education block grant amounts under Act 173 since a central feature of the weighting study was to consider to what extent changes to the weights in the broader funding formula would address concerns over transitioning to the block grant.
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 - Transition Aspects – I would like to fully evaluate the proposed weights and then determine what transition mechanisms need to be included in policy. I think it is premature to conclude that a suspension of the excess penalty threshold and/or the hold harmless provision for equalized pupils are advisable or necessary without having a complete understanding of the impact.
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 - Evaluation and Reporting – This will be a significant undertaking. It would be significant even if we were not contemplating major changes to the education funding formula. Also, we are in a period of unprecedented disruption to our education system because of the pandemic. We are already seeing new and significant reporting requirements being published by the US Department of Education to track the impact of the pandemic on schools, and the next few years will likely be a time of staffing shortages. It is not clear to me how districts will be able to both meet these new administrative requirements and attend to the important work of education recovery with staffing shortages. The evaluation

and reporting requirements of this bill will no doubt put additional demands on districts at a moment when we should be seeking to reduce administrative burdens so the system can be focused on the priority of education recovery.

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 - Creation of Education Fund Advisory Committee
 - The date of January 15 is late in the budget process for school districts. Several of the recommendations specified in the bill are typically made much early, by December 1st, in the Tax Commissioner's letter.
 - I think it should remain an administrative responsibility of the executive branch to publish a projection on tax rates and yield values by December 1st through the Tax Commissioner's letter based on the criteria established in the law. This is, by definition, a technical projection not one that should be made through a deliberative process.
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 - Agency Positions – I support 6 additional positions to implement changes to the pupil weights as described in this bill. I do not believe additional positions are necessary to implement the Education Quality Standards, however. The agency already has adequate staff in this area. The agency will require additional staff to support ELL students, and to manage the calculation and modeling of the weights, including changes to the poverty measure.