



## Kingdom East School District

PO Box 129, Hilton Dorm, 64 Campus Lane  
Lyndon Center, VT 05850

Phone: 802-626-6100 Email: [info@kingdomeast.org](mailto:info@kingdomeast.org) Fax: 802-626-8165  
Burke Concord Lyndon Lunenburg Miller's Run Newark Sutton

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Dr. Jennifer Botzjorns, Superintendent  
Kingdom East School District

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Thank you for inviting me to testify. My 36th year in education, I serve as superintendent for the rural remote Kingdom East school district in the Northeast Kingdom. We have seven Pk-8 schools and tuition to high school. My prior work was in Chittenden County, Montpelier and a small independent school in Burlington.

Equity is a significant public policy issue with heavy political pressures. It weighs the disadvantaged against all others. The disadvantaged who have not had resources and equitable experiences so all children can have a prosperous future.

I support the weighting approach and not the cost equity approach. I am going to address several concerns.

### **Why we must implement weighting**

This is urgent work, and needs to be addressed **this** year. I need to provide a picture of some of the needs of high poverty, rural, remote schools.

*Our professional staff in our district have 44 emergency or provisional licenses. This means they have not yet been fully trained and have the knowledge to deliver quality instruction. All these teachers must spend evenings and weekends obtaining the coursework, while at the same time preparing lessons. They are incredible hard working individuals, and they do not have, yet, the professional training*

Weighting that provides equitable access to education is an urgent need. We need qualified teachers.

Can you imagine going to the hospital and the ER doc had a provisional medical license, then in the operating room, the surgeon and nurses have provisional licenses, in the radiology department, the training was not yet complete.

This is one of many examples. With the weighting factors, we would use extra resources to expand training - such as a cultivating teachers grant program that trains and provides professional growth for teaching licenses. We would also use the resources to increase salaries to recruit and retain individuals to our region.

### **Weighting versus Cost Equity**

I support the weighting approach rather than the cost equity approach. The legislature funded this research, now the reality of it has become a political challenge. Equity costs money. Change is hard. We must do this.

I wouldn't be here with you today if it were not for Title IX. There are reasons we make policy changes to support the improvement of our society, in this case educational equity across the state.

One list of pros and cons states that equalized pupil calculations are “confusing to voters (and legislators!).” This is not a good reason to throw out a system. Determining tax rates is a series of 6-10 arithmetic steps (adding, subtracting, dividing, comparing, multiplying by a decimal, dividing). When one of our students does not understand the pythagorean Theorem we explain it in multiple ways we don't get rid of the formula because it's too complicated.

With weighting and the concern over cost containment, the excess spending threshold allows for every local budget to have a guardrail. Most importantly, the weighting formula has the need for equity baked in, not at the whim of a political principle, budget fluctuation or particular trend.

“Cost Equity” does not include the assumptions that are the foundation to the current funding system. One can not take out part of this system and shift it, because it “departs from the assumptions and design parameters.”

**Transition mechanisms:** Set a progressive timeline with clear structures, metrics and follow through, independent of outside pressures. One of the challenges with other legislation such as Act 173 is there are many components, and the timeline gets considered and reconsidered. Phase in over 3-5 years. Hold-harmless and spending thresholds should be baked in and tied to other economic metrics as a ratio (such as the consumer price index).

**ESSR Funds:** I believe ESSR funds should be used primarily for one time adjustments such as permanent physical plant improvements. Our District facilities are in significant need of improvement. Statewide our union schools were built in the 1960s, 70s, and without consistent substantial investment we will face a significant infrastructure crisis; we may already face this.

**District Use of increased resources.**

Some have argued that if regions are provided for, the resources would be used solely to decrease tax rates, rather than serve students. It is unfortunate that others make judgments of the commitment to students by local leaders.

It is unfair to make these assumptions. Our District voluntarily merged and as a result received an increase in financial resources. In the last four years, we added an athletic director and scores of coaches. Now ALL our middle school students in our rural remote district have access to cross country running, soccer, basketball. We created an advanced French class. We have students placed out of French I in high school. We hired a facilities manager who was able to improve heating and ventilation during the pandemic.

These are just three examples that would not have occurred without the added resources. The local Board and leadership are committed to improving the current health, safety, opportunities and outcomes

of our children. I implore you to not assume you know the answer to the question of tax relief versus a greater investment in education programs. If you are worried about there are current excess thresholds consider minimum thresholds.

**In summary**

The example of the number of trained teachers in our district illustrates the urgent need for equity. I support weighting over cost equity. Create a clear articulated transition plan, and finally respect local districts in their ability to use additional resources for student programs.

I invite you to use the analogy of a cake. The funding formula is baked in. The cost equity is icing that can be lathered on thickly or removed.

Thank you for your ongoing work - I appreciate the opportunity to testify.