

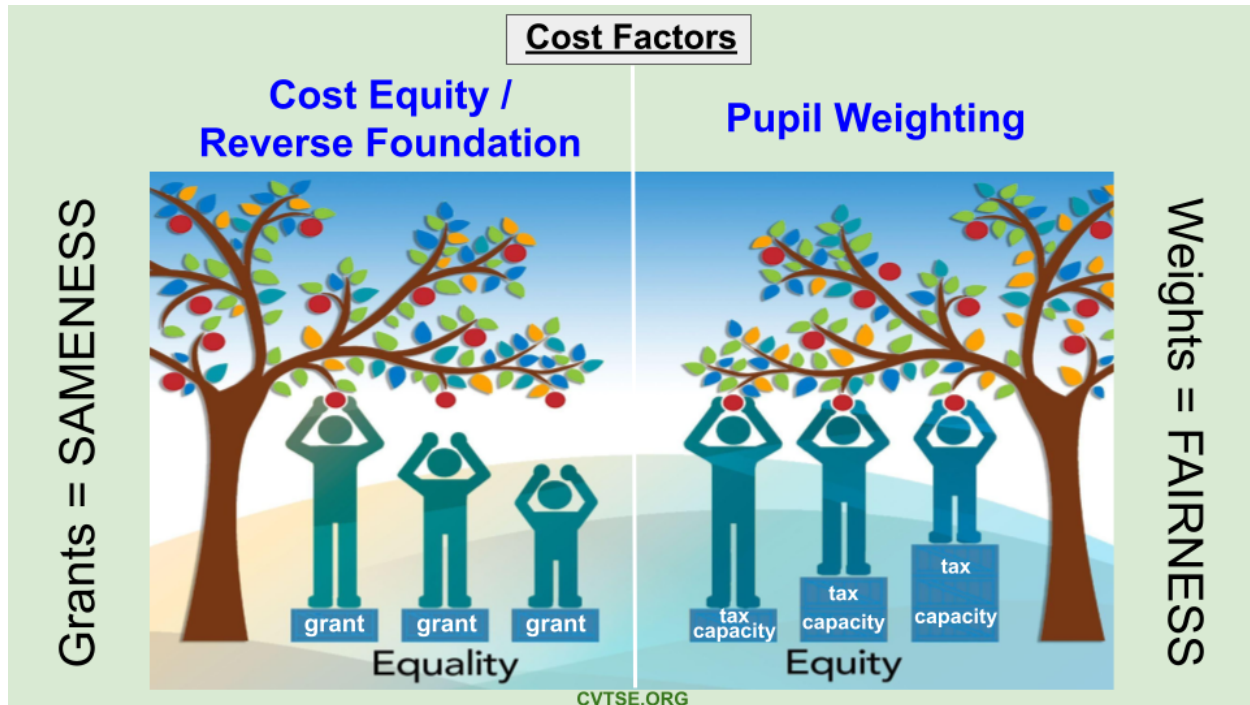
February 10, 2022

Chair Cummings and members of the Senate Committee on Finance,

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about this very important issue. My name is Marc Schaubert. I'm the executive director of The Coalition for Vermont Student Equity. We're a non-profit coalition of school boards from all parts of the state. We represent 25 districts and over 19,000 students from 11 counties and 80 cities and towns. We joined together a little over a year ago for the sole purpose of correcting the pupil weighting formula. Our coalition even includes overweight districts, such as Washington Central, Peacham and my own home town of Dover. They joined our coalition because they recognize that true equity doesn't create winners and losers, it gives everyone what they need to succeed.

We fully support the position of the VSBA, VSA, and VPA and believe your committee's inclination to adopt the corrected weights as opposed to the so-called cost equity model is a wise decision. Some of the reasons we support the weighting model are:

- School Boards, Superintendents, Principals and probably most importantly, business managers know and understand pupil weights.
- The package of weights recommended by Professor Kolbe and her team works well in our existing system that includes a funding distribution formula that is based on equity. As many have pointed out, including the Task Force Co-chairs, we have one of the most equitable systems in the country. The system isn't broken, it's only the data inputs, the weights, that need correcting. Doing so will fulfill the promises of Brigham and Act 60, while undoubtedly making Vermont the only state currently with a truly equitable education funding formula.
- The current weights have never been correct. They were a holdover from the foundation formula and never should have been applied to our system based on the pupil weighting formula. This, let's call it an oversight, in 1997 has harmed a generation of Vermont children. Overweight districts have had access to cheaper money than the underweight districts and that has hurt their students, taxpayers and these communities with rural and/or small schools, diverse populations and those with high poverty.
- As you heard from Professor Kolbe, weights are designed with cost containment in mind. I would caution you though to be careful with the implementation. Cost containment can only be achieved if the moratorium on the excess spending penalty is allowed to expire along with the full implementation of the weights.



Poverty Count

- Using Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) for poverty count is as flawed as the currently used DCF (SNAP+) count. It's just the pendulum swinging in the other direction.
 - FRL benefits wealthier districts with the resources to mail the forms out, assist parents with filling out the onerous forms, and track parents down to encourage them to fill it out.
 - Schools are now in their 2nd full year of federally funded universal free meals. There is no incentive for parents to fill out the form.
 - Separate from the pandemic related universal free meals, more and more districts have chosen to provide that for their students. Again, no reason for parents to fill out the FRL form.
 - If such a big change is to be made in how poverty is counted, please don't simply replace a flawed system with an equally flawed system. Implement a statewide mandated universal income form so that no matter where a family lives within the state, they will be counted.

CVTSE supports

- Implementation of the full package of recommended pupil weights
- As quick a transition as possible, districts cannot wait. A slow protracted transition will perpetuate the harm currently being caused to many Vermont children.



- Educational Quality Standards (EQS) is the mechanism the state should use to hold districts accountable. The State Board of Education is about to open up those standards and we support using this opportunity to strengthen them.
- Poverty count based on a universal income form which the state can mandate all parents/guardians fill out

As you continue the hard work you are doing now, please keep in mind that ultimately this is about equity and making sure local districts have the taxing capacity they need to serve the needs of their students. Equity levels the playing field. Our system will still allow wealthier districts to provide programming and services above and beyond “substantial equality of educational opportunity” as the excess spending penalty would insure those districts cover the costs and not spread them among all districts, including those districts that are currently under resourced.

Madam Chair and members of the committee, please do not let perfect become the enemy of good. What act 60 created was a very good system. Is it perfect? No. There is no such thing as a perfect education funding system. But as the Task Force co-chairs pointed out frequently over the summer, it’s one of the most equitable systems in the country. Our system does not need an overhaul, it simply needs the weights to be corrected based on empirical data. We have that data, and now it is up to you and your colleagues to implement the corrections this session.

Thank you.