

Senate Finance testimony
2/2/22

Good afternoon,

My name is Sonya Spaulding and I am the chair of the Barre Unified Union School District Board. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you regarding the pupil weighting model versus the cost equity model.

Our board is a member of the Coalition for Vermont Student Equity, which represents 11 counties, 80 cities and towns, 25 districts and supervisory unions and over 19,000 students. The Coalition includes both underweighted districts like mine, and overweighted districts like our neighbors in Washington Central.

Our BUUSD has over 2300 students, with between 40-50 ELL students and with about 30% of our students living in poverty. This is roughly 700 students in our district who qualify for free and reduced hot lunch.

I'm here today to advocate for the implementation of the corrected pupil weights, as I believe this to be the most equitable way to ensure, and continue to ensure, funding for all of our students. I believe the work of Professor Kolbe and her colleagues on the pupil weighting study should be recognized and implemented, rather than the cost equity model which has not been properly vetted. We should use data to inform our decisions, instead of creating a new model that has not been tested. We have no idea how the cost equity model will impact our students, our schools and our education fund in both the short and long term.

The cost equity models could further widen the equity gaps in the bottom and top spending districts, since it is based on an average. Our school is currently proposing a per pupil spending for FY23 at \$16,252. We are one of the lowest spending districts in the state, with the state average at \$18,023. Instead of every district getting what they need, which is equity, every district would get the same or an average. A dollar doesn't spend the same in every district. The cost equity model does not account for these differences in costs across districts. The weights do.

One major concern for me is cost containment. As a very low spending district, I often hear Vermonters complain about how much it costs to educate our students and how we need to curb these out-of-control costs. The cost equity model will not help to control spending, but could mean we, as a state, actually spend more than we need to. I'm concerned that these grants in the cost equity model will mean more spending and then there will be more outrage and we will lose again. Our students deserve more. They deserve the stability and consistency of using the corrected pupil weights in the funding formula.

While I recognize that there are concerns with how schools will spend the money and the accountability for those additional funds, I wonder where the accountability is now for the overweighted districts? Where is the concern for where their extra taxing capacity is going? More arts, afterschool programs, more athletics and enrichment, or, more staff, more

interventions, more tutors? Our students would love any one of those things and would benefit from them just as students in other, wealthier districts. Why are districts with higher poverty levels and a higher number of ELL students different than the districts with lower poverty and fewer ELL students? Do we trust those overweighted districts more? I would certainly hope not, considering I represent one of the underweighted districts and serve my community with the highest standards and ethics, as I expect every other elected board member in the state to do.

I have served my community on the school board for the last 11 years. Budget season is always difficult. As you may have guessed, with a large number of students living in poverty, we have a large number of our families living in poverty. We often struggle to pass budgets, with our last budget finally passing on the third round of voting. As you can probably imagine, the fluff in our budgets is non-existent. We don't have extra programs to cut or extra staff. Some members of our community are questioning why our children have such low-test scores, and to be honest, I believe the main reason is that we do not spend enough on our students, because our community cannot afford a tax increase. We struggle to retain quality teaching staff. We do not have an afterschool program. We have limited arts and enrichment and athletics. Students have spoken to our board and asked why they can't get new textbooks and supplies. We are running a tight ship and our students are bearing the brunt of it. Our students need your help. Please recommend the implementation of the corrected pupil weights. The communities that have been underweighted for the past 20 or more years have done their best. We didn't know that the weights were incorrect. No one did. But now we do. We can't wait anymore. We cannot wait for you to create another study or another task force. And we can't further overwhelm our schools and our business offices with a new system. We need to make this right for our students. We need to move forward with implementing the corrected student weights.

Thank you again for your time.

Sonya Spaulding

Barre Unified Union School District