

Hello everyone. My name is Cyrus Lynch, and I am a Junior at Essex High School and one of the two student representatives on the Essex Westford School District School Board. This is my second time testifying to the Vermont Legislature about the issues surrounding Act 73.

I am here today to express my concern about the proposed funding of Special Education under Act 73. The proposed foundation formula is predicted to underfund special education across Vermont by 59 million dollars. Specifically, it would underfund special education in EWSD by 6 million dollars, which is over a quarter of our entire special education budget. Due to federal maintenance of effort requirements, which prevent school districts from reducing their special education funding, we would be legally required to make up this deficit through cuts in other areas. If we did not meet our maintenance of effort requirements for special education, we would lose an additional 1.4 million dollars of federal funding.

Having to make up 6 million dollars from other places in our district would be incredibly detrimental. For example, taking 6 million dollars out of our budget would be the equivalent of cutting our entire student transportation budget *and* our entire athletics budget, and it would still fail to fill the deficit.

The Essex Westford School District serves approximately 4,000 students, over 30% of whom receive special education services. Our special education services include a full-time therapeutic school, a number of integrative clubs and programs, comprehensive individualized plans to achieve student success, and draw students from all over Vermont to our district.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, students who require special education services are part of one or more of the 14 established categories of disability. These disabilities vary greatly in their impact on the student, and include a variety of both physical, intellectual, and emotional disabilities.

In comparison, under Act 73's foundation formula, students would be divided into 3 "levels" of weighted funding depending on the perceived severity of their diagnosis. This would not take individual students into account, instead reducing them to a disability and a label of A, B, or C. This system will never work and is grossly unfair to all students. It is flat-out wrong to assume that a shared diagnosis makes one student the same as another. A student with a "high" level disability may cost significantly less than a student with a "low" level disability due to dozens of other factors like home life, poverty, social and emotional needs, and primary language spoken.

Disabilities are not black and white, and the way that they impact students is incredibly differentiated.

I am a student with a 504 plan, and I receive and benefit from special education services. I often find myself forming a community with other students who receive these services due to our shared experiences. This experience, and my experience as a student representative on the EWSD School Board, has allowed me to meet and connect with so many students in my district who receive special education services, and has shown me how wide the scope is of student needs. These needs are not stagnant either. While I have had the same official diagnoses throughout my time in Essex High School, I can say that the level of support I have needed from special education coordinators has fluctuated so much depending on my personal life, my commitments, and my growth as a student and person.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you all, and I appreciate you listening to me today. I would also like to recognize and thank you all for your work on Bill H.955. I know that you are all trying to do what is best for Vermonters. I have a unique perspective as a student and a school board member, which gives me special insight into what funding changes will mean in my day-to-day life, at my school, and in my education. Because of this position, I believe it's my duty to speak up on behalf of my fellow students. I ask you to preserve maintenance of effort and federal funding for special education and to approach cuts to education funding with the utmost caution.