

Task Force on the Implementation of Per Pupil Weighting Factors Public Comment

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I understand you are considering the use of categorical grants to rectify the inequity highlighted by the Pupil Weighting study.

In doing so please look carefully at the real-world application of categorical education grants in Vermont, rather than the hypothetical use of grants vs weighting. A look at how actual grants are being disbursed gives you a glimpse into how grants can over time be manipulated.

An example to consider is the Small Schools Grant.

The small school grant was created in direct response to the Brigham decision. The 1998 Small Schools Study attests to this, I was a member of that study group. The purpose of the grant was clear, to provide economy of scale to our smallest schools.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jhZwlgj4RmpRjibCiV7y7zq_QPHYE5zs/view?usp=sharing

Over the past 6 years the small schools grant has been diverted from its original purpose in the following ways.

1. Districts were urged to merge to receive the small schools grant “in perpetuity” as a *merger support grant* in the new larger district. Never mind that the intent of creating new larger districts was to create a greater economy of scale and the original reason for the small school grant was mute due to merger.
2. Hand in hand small schools were threatened with the loss of the small schools grant if they did not, were not required to or were forcibly merged by the state. In doing so the law used the small schools grant to destabilize districts by creating fear and uncertainty in budgeting.
3. Now a dual system is in place - some districts, those who merged, receive the *merger support grant* “in perpetuity.” Others have to apply annually for a grant and jump through hoops, after which they may or may not receive the grant. Certainty in school budgeting for some, annual uncertainty for others. Unequal access to resources and unequal educational opportunity locked in place, an entitlement for some and a merit grant for others.
4. Consider 2 examples - Weybridge a low poverty affluent community just seven miles from Middlebury on a paved road automatically receives a merger support grant annually to boost the coffers of the larger merged unit, ACSD. Lowell a rural community with one of the highest poverty levels in the state, was not required to merge, Lowell has to jump hoops annually and in any given year could lose its small schools grant.
5. If I had more time I would analyze each of the metrics required annually for the small school districts who were forced into merger or who remain unmerged. The metrics did not go through

rulemaking and the state board itself complained of the inadequacy of its own metrics when it submitted a letter to the legislature requesting the issue be revisited https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-state-board-item-j-06_27_18-letter.pdf The issue has not been revisited and a look at the metrics reveals further inequities piled into an already corrupted scheme.

The legislature would be hard put to come up with a more blatantly inequitable system. On its face it is inequitable and the details compound the inequity. The dual standard for resource distribution defies Brigham which clearly states that children should have equitable access to resources regardless of their town of residence.

The Weighting study gives you an opportunity to get Vermont back on track and bury this shameful business. You can remove uncertainty in budgeting, you can treat communities and their children equitably, you can focus the resources to their purpose, you can end discrimination based on merger status. Weighting provides you an opportunity to be fair and balanced and base the outcome on reasonable metrics which are not easily manipulated. Take this opportunity, act fairly and impartially and follow the recommendations of the weighting study.

“The distribution of a resource as precious as educational opportunity may not have as its determining force the mere fortuity of a child’s residence. It requires no particular constitutional expertise to recognize the capriciousness of such a system.” Vermont Supreme Court