



STATE OF VERMONT
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

October 28th, 2021
(via email)

Dear Chair Hardy, Chair Kornheiser and members of the Task Force on the Implementation of the Pupil Weighting Factors Report,

Your work to implement S.13, *An act relating to the implementation of the Pupil Weighting Factors Report* is critically important. Student weights are one of the key factors for the State of Vermont to ensure our funding system is equitably balanced and the state is providing substantially equal educational opportunities for every student in every community as required by the Vermont Constitution. Other balancing factors include the equalized grand list, per pupil spending and the excess spending threshold.

I'm writing today because the time for the Task Force is more than halfway through and there are aspects of your work and direction that are troubling me.

The General Assembly secured a comprehensive and empirically derived resource to assess if student cost in our education finance system was weighted correctly. The recommendations from that analysis indicate **our current system is greatly out of balance. Our neediest** students' districts were penalized for trying to access what were -less resources than needed- to provide substantially equal education opportunities. These students are underweighted and have suffered a life altering twenty-year injustice.

The Task Force has repeatedly signaled it is going in a different direction than the recommendations in the report, and in fact the first recommendation brought forth by the Task Force does go in a different direction. I have several concerns/questions:

- In a system balanced to deliver equity, the presence of underweighted districts, means there also are overweighted districts. These overweighted districts are where the wealthiest students with the least increased learning needs live in typically larger communities.
- While underweighted districts have been penalized for trying to access less resources than needed, overweighted districts have been rewarded for accessing more resources than they need. This is a perverse injustice. It is also not spoken about.

- Witness from underweighted districts and overweighted districts have experienced different receptions from the Task Force. An underweighted district was inexplicably harshly interrogated as to why they didn't spend more on their students. A few weeks later an overweighted district was invited in to testify about the need for more resources for ELL in their school. No acknowledgement that said school already can over access resources due to incorrect weighting. No question about why said school wasn't spending more on their ELL students right now.
- When our education financing mechanism discriminates against (differentiates, treats outside of the equity calculation) people living in poverty by questioning their ability to make the same decisions their wealthy neighbors have made for 20 years that is correctly called poverty shaming. When a community is not wealthy, the assumption is if they could make good decisions, their community wouldn't be poor. **Making good decisions does not equal wealth.**
- Members of the Task Force have openly disagreed with the recommended nationally researched, empirically derived weight for poverty - without clear and consistent explanation as to why the recommendations from the peer reviewed analysis the legislature asked for are inaccurate.
- The TF recommendation to move the ELL student needs out of the equity calculation and fund it with \$10 million dollars annually of new categorical aid funding, appears to be based on averages of current spending, not on factors of student need.
- **Recommendations for a mechanism that treats a cohort of black and brown students differently then other students rightfully attracts scrutiny.**
- The entire focus of the report – student weights – has been panned in general related to questions of accountability. But we only hear about accountability going forward and as it relates to districts that have been harmed. We do not hear about accountability going forward (or looking backwards) as it relates to districts that have benefited from this life-altering unjust system. Is the TF not curious about exactly what has been provided for these districts that was not able to be provided for the underweighted districts? My district certainly is and has pushed for a common chart of accounts for more then a decade to understand the finer details of this unjust inequity.
- The TF is signaling that they are coming back with a set of weights in the research that were not recommended – those derived utilizing district level data. The rationale being that everything we do is by district. After several readings of Appendix A of the report, I'm not sure that rationale matches up with how the two different sets of weights were derived or why one set of weights was recommended over the other.

- I've heard reference to 4th or 5th revisions of modeling underway. Where are these models? What is the TF modeling? If the public doesn't know what you are modeling and can't see the models, what are they supposed to offer public comment on?
- Why did the TF not contract to update the districts in the weight simulator as was allowed for under Act 59?
- Why have you given Public Assets Institute, the architects of the system currently under scrutiny, such an outsized role in these deliberations?
- In a balanced system, correcting the unjust weight our system will produce shocks and large wealthier districts will face significant pressures to reduce budgets and increase taxes. Acknowledging that reality is the first step in mitigating those shocks. What planning are you doing or have you done to mitigate those shocks? Very few overweighted districts have testified. Is this because the modeling has not been made public?

The Task Force's decision-making and signaling of direction that run counter to the report are curious. For what reason does the Task Force believe it has been convened?

A deep and systemic injustice has been uncovered by request of a previous Legislature and the Scott Administration. Those of us in rural, poor, and black and brown Vermont, who have had an entire generation of our students harmed by this system, believe you have been convened to correct those deep and systemic injustices.

Sincerely,

Rep. Laura Sibilila, Windham/Bennington District

CC:

Senate Pro Tem Becca Balint

Rep. Jill Krowinski, Speaker of the House