

My name is Alex Yin and thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of the [Coalition for Vermont Student Equity](#).

I want to first thank the Task Force for your report on Pupil Weighting. I greatly appreciate the time and effort it took to complete the report over the past 6 months.

I also want to acknowledge the efforts of past and current legislators in creating an equitable education system. These conversations are never easy and so the willingness to tackle such difficult issues. In creating the current system, I recognize that it was progressive for its time. But change is inevitable. Fortunately for us, we have people who do research to ensure that we become more effective and efficient for this ever-changing world. In reflecting, I am thankful for the innovative thought process of the legislators in 1997, but no doubt all of us know the current pupil weights are not correct.

I joined the Winooski School Board in 2017, because I thought my academic background, which includes masters' degrees in electrical engineering and applied statistics and PhD in higher education and professional background, which includes 16 years working in institutional research and assessment would be an asset. My professional peers have also recognized my expertise as I was recently elected to be President-elect of the [North East Association for Institutional Research](#), which includes higher education institutions from Maine to Ohio to Maryland. In short, my expertise is in education and analyzing data. I also ran for the Winooski School Board because as an Asian American, I knew it would be important for the students of color in my community to see people of color in leadership positions.

At times, I feel I have failed them especially during the budget season when I was trying to balance their needs with what our taxpayers could afford. I thought when I joined the school board, I would be fighting to fund the arts program in a fiscally responsible way that would prevent gentrification. Hence we would be educating the students that were currently living in our school district and not pricing them out of our city. Little did I know, I would be making decisions between year-round busing, school supplies, or building and updating a facility so that students did not have to learn in classrooms that sometimes reached 90 degrees. These are things that many would consider are basic needs for a student. After reading Pupil Weighting Factors Report (PWF Report), I learned the failure was not on me but the inadequate weights of our current system.

I have no doubt that we all agree “the current weights for students living in poverty, English Language Learners (ELL), and secondary school student were insufficient and that additional weights should be added to address further inequities related to middle school students, school districts in sparsely populated regions of the State, and geographically necessary small schools (p.4).” Given the numerous public testimonies from parents, students, teachers, principals, and superintendents, we can see the harm it has done to our children. It is also not by accident that the best schools according to US News and World Report Rankings are in well-funded districts.

Thus, I appreciate that the Task Force constantly asks, “If we were to rebuild our school finance system from the bottom up to better ensure educational equity, how would you do it? (p. 8)” In answering this question, I think we can turn to higher education for guidance. In the past, higher education quality was primarily judged by inputs such as expenditures per student, number of library books, number of applications, etc. It is only in the last 20 years, we not only judged by inputs but also by its outputs (e.g., learning outcomes, retention rates, degrees awarded).

The elegance of the PWF Study is that it created weights with an outcome in mind. In simple terms, the researchers used 10 years of data to examine what the costs would be for equitable student achievement. In the study, student achievement is defined as the average mean scale across grades and subject areas. I appreciate the Task Force Committee's concern is that outcomes were the standardized testing. Yes, I agree that they are not the most perfect measure, but there is no such thing as a perfect metric. Yet, aren't these the same metrics that the public is evaluating us on with regards to the quality of the school district. The measures used by the researcher was as good a metric as you were going to get. And I appreciate that the researchers did not let perfection get in the way of progress.

With that said, I have told members of the Task Force that if you are not happy with those metrics then to please use items from the Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) such as:

- Feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for at least a two-week period, past 12 months
- Have at least one teacher or other adult in their school they can talk to
- Feel valued in the community.

These are data collected on a regular cycle, which would not place any additional burdens on our schools. The question then becomes why ask the public if you aren't going to listen?

I appreciate the Task Force's effort to provide an alternative solution to an equitable weighting system. And at first glance the cost equity formula approach appears to be reasonable. However, on a deeper dive there are many flaws with the cost equity formula. There is a reason why it took the PWF researchers over a year to complete the report which included a policy scan, literature reviews and peer state profiles, and interviews to obtain stakeholder perceptions and experiences with existing funding formula. Creating a solution for a brand new equitable system does not take merely 12 meetings and the flaws are evident from a practical standpoint. For example,

- Given that it is taken so long for the state to provide information regarding yield, equalized pupil, and the common level of appraisal (CLA), trying to add "actual funding equivalent" to the equation would making planning almost impossible for those school districts who rely on these funds. Did you study the merits on how long it would take to calculate "actual funding equivalent"?
- What gets counted in these costs (which would add more administrative burden to districts needing these funds)? These costs will become harder to untangle especially as education moves towards Universal Design in its design of the curriculum and programs such as the Multi-tiered system of support. The core of this philosophy is if we account for all the characteristics of our student population; everybody benefits.
- The notion of transparency is flawed especially since there is need to mask small counts. Given that 52 school districts meet the small school criteria (p. 24), it is highly unlikely that the transparency desired will actually be accomplishable (see [Agency of Education Dashboards](#) and note the number of hidden cells due to small counts).

Yet the real issue that the Coalition of Vermont Student Equity has with the cost equity formula is that it erodes local control. This is truly a slap to the face of all Vermonters, because essentially you told us that the state government does not trust us to take care of our children. This is highly ironic, since it was a state formula that prevented many of our school districts from educating our children in an equitable way. For the past 20 years, the state has trusted wealthy districts to make spending decisions that are

best for their students and their communities. I want local control for my district as well, and it is a true Vermont value, because our community can hold our school board officials much more accountable than legislators who do not live in our district. This is why we recommend the general set of school-level weights proposed in the [PWF Report authors' October 28, 2021 memo](#), but we only support these weights when they include the ELL weight.

As a person of color, I understand your concern with low-incidence districts not being able or willing to provide resources for ELL students. I traveled the state often to attend many of the county fairs in the summer and I cringe and worry about my safety when I see people wearing shirts with the Confederate Flag. Even in a city that as diverse as Winooski, I have been made to feel like an outsider (e.g., the number of times I am asked if I am a Winooski resident even though I have introduced myself as the Winooski School Board member). Therefore, we do recommend a hybrid approach to ensure school districts with a small number of ELL students are appropriately funded. Correct the weights, and then offer additional aid to districts that educate a small number of ELL students.

In the PWF Report authors' October 28, 2021 memo, they write:

A categorical funding program for ELL students could be a viable policy alternative if the funding available through this program is equivalent to the cost offset that would be generated by the weight identified in Model 4

Unfortunately, the Task Force Report has not identified a methodology that provides equivalent cost offsets that would be generated by the weight. The proposed ELL categorical aid methodology in the Task Force Report is based past ELL budgets. This will only perpetuate inequities for ELL students, because the design of the formula is based on an inequitable funding formula. For example, during our budget meeting this week, I learned it would cost around \$130,000 to translate all of our handbooks and policies to ensure accessibility for the parents of our ELL students. I don't see how the categorical aid process would allow a school district to do this, but increasing our taxing capacity does give us a chance to do this. Thus, why are districts that are welcoming to immigrants, refugees, and new Americans being punished? Please do not delay the process of implementing the weights, when the work has already been completed. Not adequately funding our ELL students is not only discriminatory, but also make our goals of creating an inclusive and welcoming environment even more difficult.

The Coalition supports the move to using Free and Reduced-Price Lunch as a measure for poverty, but only if the universal form is put in place. To change this measure without using a universal form will result in a substantially undercounted poverty count, as many Free and Reduced-Price Lunch forms go unreturned because of various reasons including COVID-19 and now universal free lunch.

Rural districts and small schools are also suffering greatly under the current, inequitable formula. The conditions of these small and rural schools and the harm they have experienced have been lost in this process. These are schools that have very specific needs to fund, funding needs that have pushed their tax-base to their breaking points. These are districts that tend have a high percentage of students living in poverty and students with disabilities. If you went and toured some of these schools, you'd be shocked. Buildings sit in disrepair; classrooms are tiny, and space is beyond limited, supplies are scarce. Teacher salaries are substantially lower and therefore it's nearly impossible to attract and retain new

staff. Why would a teacher teach at Hazen Union where the average salary is \$56,652, when they could teach at South Burlington where the average teacher salary is \$80,294?

Another alarm bell that we are ringing is the impending implementation of Act 173. Act 173 cannot be implemented except in conjunction with the corrected weights. The needs of districts that have high poverty, small schools, extreme sparsity and those that educate high numbers of ELL students will face catastrophic budgeting issues should a block grant based on census be implemented without implementing the corrected weights.

In reading the report, I started asking myself, “What happened to a government that is of the people, for the people, by the people?” In reading the reports, where are data of public opinion and endorsements from the Vermont School Board Association (VSBA)? Where is analysis of the comments to address the concerns of the public, superintendents, principals, and the Coalition for Vermont Student Equity? I appreciate you allowed us to speak, but was the Task Force listening? If you were, then these were the critical questions you needed to answer in your report:

Critical Questions to Answer:

- What is the true philosophy behind the cost equity formula? Are we trying to be equitable from a cost perspective? Doesn't that mean those who can afford to pay more should, because in the long term when we invest in our children, Vermont is better for it? Yet that doesn't seem to be the case with your cost equity proposal and goes against the findings that it costs more money to educate certain types of students.
- If you are worried about the weights hurting the over weighted districts, why not offer them categorical aid? Why is it the districts with limited resources cannot be trusted to use their taxing capacity to properly provide the equitable education their children deserve? This sounds like a double standard to me.
- If you were worried about accountability, why not build accountability as Senator Brock as suggested? Higher Education has been doing this for over 20 years. Yes, it may seem odd to talk about a learning outcomes audit, but a simple conversation with educational experts would have directed you to the field of learning outcomes assessment. By the way, this is part of my job duty to ensure the University of Vermont stays accredited by the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE). I am more than happy to help on this effort. But before you talk about accountability, make sure we have the capabilities to properly achieve the desirable outcomes (i.e., the weighting formula proposal gives ability to resource and the ability to plan).
- Why did the Task Force only examine the short-term impacts and not think about the potential long-term impacts of implementing the pupil weighting factors? For example, we know that if we do a good job of educating our students, they are more likely to stay in the community when they become adults.

The beauty of the Coalition for Vermont Student Equity is that we stand united, because we care for all of our students. Even though there are many other things I would rather be doing with my time than studying and analyzing educational funding formulas, one of the plus sides has been working with Vermonters from all over the state fighting for educational equity. We trusted in each other's respective expertise and lived experiences. I have also been able to hear the majority of the testimonies from the public begging the legislators to give them the ability to properly educate the children in our communities. Be brave, be bold, be courageous and provide the recommendation to implement the pupil weighting factors and remove the cost equity formula proposal. I know Vermonters will have your back.