

TO: Task Force on the Implementation of the Pupil Weighting Factors Report
FROM: Jeff Fannon, Executive Director
DATE: December 10, 2021
RE: Report of the Task Force on Pupil Weighting

Thank you for giving Vermont-NEA the opportunity to give some preliminary thoughts on your draft Report of the Task Force on Pupil Weighting. It is obvious this is complicated, that you have weighed a lot of possible factors and solutions (no pun intended), and, truthfully, this issue has tremendous consequences for districts, staff, students, and communities. Thank you for your very hard work with this very complicated subject. This is not just a weighting discussion, as it involves tax policy and education quality standards, i.e., this is not easy, so thank you.

As you have heard, the issue of weighting is complex and the history of how we got the current weights is unclear. We believe how we weight for students, especially those from poverty and with a disability, is very important and making adjustments to the current weighting is needed. We know and have spoken previously about the complex and increasing social and emotional needs of our students and the affect that has on their ability to access their learning. How we weight for students with some of those complex needs affects how local districts choose to support those same students. What the exact or appropriate weighting should be is beyond our expertise and we appreciate the draft nature of your report. Poverty is key and we must truly account for those children growing up in poverty and that includes providing schools with the appropriate resources with which to educate children from impoverished backgrounds. The “universal income declaration” form, in concept, is advisable but compliance may be a concern.

We all need to get this right, or at the very least give ourselves room to make some changes and then study the changes to ensure we don’t over-correct issues and make matters worse, however well intentioned. As such, I agree with the draft report’s suggestion to establish an Education Tax Advisory Committee to advise the Legislature going forward. Likewise, the “evaluation mechanism” also is advisable.

Regarding the specific recommendations on page 4-5, ELL categorical aid, students in poverty, small schools and merger grants, and transition supports, these all seem ripe for further discussion and merit serious consideration. The small school grant issue, however, does need to extend state support to our rural schools, which does not appear to be the case on page 4. As Vermont-NEA testified to the House Education Committee last February, the Pupil Weighting Study provided significant and important analysis and we fundamentally agree that if we continue to use weights as the metric to high-quality equitable education for all students they must be adjusted. The cost equity formula approach is interesting and is self-described as simpler, which makes it seem all the more attractive, but without a fuller understanding of it, which we don’t yet have, we reserve further comment.

The mention of possibly accounting for students in need of mental health services and suffering from in trauma (recommendation on the top of page 6) is a very worthy recommendation. Before the pandemic this was an issue and it has only gotten worse during the pandemic. Indeed, Vermont-NEA held a *Summit on Safe, Compassionate Learning Environments* in May of 2019 attended by more than 200 Vermont educators and trauma experts. Students in need of such services must receive them, and schools are the sanctuaries where these services are delivered to students—that must be acknowledged and resources made available to make that happen.

The ELL section is critical, but frankly the section is not yet formed enough on which to comment. Obviously the changes discussed are significant and without greater details opining as to one suggestion versus another is premature. Adequately funding for these ELL students, again, is a necessity that Vermont-NEA supports.

Finally, and as I said in August when I testified, Vermont-NEA supports the Tax Structure Commission’s suggestion to abolish the residential property tax in favor of the income tax. We believe that simplicity, equity and fairness are critical and moving forward with the Commission recommendation would be good for our schools, communities, and taxpayers. Income taxes, like property taxes, are variable at the margins but income taxes are stable enough to fund state government, and the Commission said it was “the best way to measure tax burden on a given taxpayer and it is the most progressive way to tax residents for education at this time.” For this reason, the Commission “recommend[ed] replacing the hybrid property/income homestead tax base with a single tax base, and, to maintain equity, that single tax base should be income.” Vermont-NEA supports the Commission’s recommendation and appreciates that the Task Force took testimony on this and included it as one of your additional recommendations for consideration in the draft report.

We know this is not easy or simple, and many will criticize, but success may take several years and several iterations, and we want to walk that path you and support what you’ve accomplished so far. Thank you.