

Testimony to Commission on the Future, 11-4-24

Time is precious

Thank you madam chair. Good afternoon, everybody.

As Jeff Francis pointed out at the first meeting of this Commission, the charge to issue a preliminary report on cost containment measures by this December would be a challenge, to say the least, and even more so to provide clear information to help school districts build their budgets for FY 26.

I watched most of the Ed Finance Subcommittee meeting on October 28<sup>th</sup>, and it was dismaying to see so much time spent on a report that is not really applicable to our brave little state – I see the Picus Report as a square peg that some are trying to hammer into a round hole, and several comments by Dr. Picus himself bear this out. In the interest of time here today, I will just hit the high spots, but I have provided timestamps of selected quotes from the video in the written form of this testimony for your convenience.

28:20 – 28:30: Early in his presentation Dr. Picus said the estimate that Vermont is over spending on education by some \$400 to \$460 million relied in part on an assumption about how much is spent on after school and summer school programs.

28:43 – He went on to say they “Also put in a small factor to consider weights for small schools based on weights generated in other places.”

29:40 – 32:06 was spent with him trying unsuccessfully to share a screen – 2 ½ minutes that the Commission will never get back.

33:50: He said if they had spent some time getting a feel for small schools, they anticipate that the estimate for adequate spending in Vermont would increase. (See bottom of page 5 of the report)

37:29 – Regarding class sizes, he said that he didn’t want to use the word “unique”...“but it is probably unique in Vermont that your class sizes typically are substantially smaller than our model.”

38:35 – He said we could rely on current practices in Vermont, which isn’t necessarily a bad thing, or go to a model used in other states.

39:10 – He pointed out that the “adequacy estimates” are a floor, and that choosing to allocate more resources for students isn’t bad.

43:40: Welcome Centers were not included in the study because those situations are “temporary”. They can be funded by the state, and when the needs go away so does the funding.

56:10: Dr. Picus noted they have had a long relationship with Wyoming, and their test scores were high to begin with, but he doesn’t know if they’ve grown a lot since then.

58:20 – 1:00:24: Commissioner Mace questioned the apparent 82% decrease in funding for ELL resources the Picus Report recommends, making note of a study released in January of 2024 that was in a Vermont-specific context – the reality we face – and noted how diverse the community in her district, Winooski, is.

Dr. Picus responded “There is no question that there is something of a disconnect.” (between the two studies), adding at

1:01:27: “I don’t know about the specific demographics of Winooski,”

1:02:55 – 1:03:20: He referred to the needs for ELL resources as “unique, for a short period of time.”

1:03:40: He purported that districts could vote to provide additional supports for students by increasing their property tax rate based upon their wealth.

1:04: In reference to a special needs student moving a few miles to another district, he conceded “My knowledge of geography in Vermont is not enough to tell you what that community might be.”

1:07:30: Still referring to providing supports for special needs, he says it is more a state challenge than a local challenge, “and I know that gets mixed-up in Vermont a little bit.”

I know Governor Scott has hitched his wagon to the report, but I would implore the Commission to not spend much more of your valuable time considering information that, in the author’s own words, does not apply to us here.

Respectfully submitted,

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