

June 5, 2018

Dear Chair Huling and State Board of Education Members,

We are writing to express our concerns about the future of Small Schools Grants and how they will assure the equity for Vermont students in small rural schools. The flawed formula the Agency of Education used to determine Geographic Isolation treats our public-school students as less deserving of a short bus ride than students who attend independent schools, by failing to consider the entire bus ride. In addition, our rural schools often have high levels of students in poverty, and these grants help assure these students receive an equitable education.

The metrics established by the AOE for Geographic Isolation deem it acceptable for our K-8 students to travel almost 2 hours round trip if our local school were closed. This 'reasonable' drive time was established by comparing apples and oranges; drive times between schools for public students as compared with drive times from home to school for students attending independent schools. According to the AOE memo from Donna Russo Savage of August 30, 2017, the reasonable drive time between schools was established as 15 minutes or less between the current and next closest school, citing that 33% of tuition students traveling to independent schools travel longer than 20 minutes door to door. This number fails to consider the long drive times Vermont's rural students undertake to get to their current school, before adding the additional time to travel to the nearest school. 15 minutes as an amount of time to travel to the nearest school may sound reasonable, however this is only a small portion of their trip, as no students live at the school.

In Dummerston, the scheduled bus trip for many student's is already 1.5 hours. This does not include the time spent getting to the bus stop, which can be 5 minutes or more away by car in each direction in good road conditions. This would create a journey for many of our K-8 students of almost 2 hours. While the study cited almost 33% of tuition students travel more than 20 minutes, the drive times for some of our students would be at 57 minutes if our local school were closed. This is almost three times the number used to determine a long commute for private school students. It should also be noted that Putney Central School (Dummerston's nearest school), does not currently have capacity for all Dummerston's students. We urge the board to consider the entire trip to establish reasonable travel times for a Vermont-public school Kindergartener to receive a public education, and not treat Vermont's rural public school students as second class citizens to those with private school vouchers.

We are also concerned that the elimination of Small Schools Grants violates the intent of the Brigham Decision and Act 60, which was to help provide equity to student in rural schools. The requirement that we assure that all Vermont children are receiving an equitable education is not removed by Act 46 or 49.

Thank you for your consideration-

The Dummerston Town School Board.

