

May 15, 2018

To the State Board of Education,
Re: Small Schools Grant Metrics

In changing the metrics for Small Schools Grant eligibility, it seems an underlying question is being asked: 'should the State keep supporting small schools?' Some of the changes being discussed seem designed to make almost all schools ineligible, essentially ending the grant program. We believe that commitments to equity and excellence require supporting some smaller schools and the students that attend them, and that this must remain at the forefront of all decision-making. This will mean weighing qualitative issues with quantitative ones. Specifically here, this involves weighing the impact of long daily bus rides on young children (that would occur if their school were to close) and the importance of community schools to rural families and rural economies, with the assumed cost-savings of implied consolidation alternatives. Importantly, as Act 60, Section 93 dictates, in addition to economic considerations, small schools' "contribution to the strength and cohesiveness of small communities" is a factor to be analyzed and weighed in the overall calculation of whether an individual school receives such a grant or not.

My Barnard colleague and I have gone through the questions that the Board is considering about these metrics and would like to offer feedback on several points within the categories 1) excellence, 2) efficiency, and 3) geographic isolation. I will offer comments on academic excellence and geographic isolation and Carin Park, the other representative here from Barnard will address the metrics on operational efficiency.

Within the category of academic excellence, it seems that the most reasonable approach to data suppression for the small cohorts issue would be to merge all grade-levels, and/or merge two years of data. There seems to be an emphasis on standardized test scores in recent conversations, and we hope that does not reflect the totality of what will be used to assess academic excellence. We hope that the Vermont Educational Quality Standards will be used to gauge excellence, as referenced in the law.

Regarding the shift in metrics defining geographic isolation, we are unaware of evidence presented to the board that would result in doubling the metric. While we applaud consideration of time over miles, these extreme changes appear to be designed to make most schools ineligible. As an example of actual bus times compared to using school-to-school miles and/or time, for actual student's, Barnard's bus schedule to the Union MS/HS in our area ranges between 18-52 minutes *each way* in optimum weather (from the first pick up at 6:37, to the last at 7:27, before arriving at the school at 7:45), demonstrating that many students live far from the local school, rural roads can be slow, and busses make stops. This means we currently have some older students on the bus for almost two hours a day, and we are on the low end of the current threshold, at exactly ten miles school-to-school and a 17-minute drive.

As impediments to sleep time; and to play and extra-curricular time after school, these long commutes are detrimental to educational quality. Safety issues are raised as well, with small bodies on busses that traverse a variety of types of roads and conditions. We can't imagine increasing the amount of allowable time on a bus, which is already a burden for our older students. Long bus rides will have a negative impact on actual children's quality of life and daily educational readiness. We urge you to consider these impacts, and therefore retain the current metric, as well add metrics that take road types, conditions, and weather patterns into account.

If Small School Grant metrics change as dramatically as is being considered, it will be--in effect--a dismantling of Section 93 of Act 60. This would seem to defy the goal of increasing equity.

Thank you,

Pamela Fraser
Barnard