

Testimony regarding the Operational Efficiency assessment for Small Schools Grants

When adjudicating the operational efficiency of a small school that may require support to adequately and equitably serve the children of its town -- the original purpose of the SSG under Act 60 -- we must not hold the bar for assessment of "efficiency" higher than the average efficiency seen across the State. The purpose of the Small Schools Grant is to attempt to financially support equity in Vermont in deliberate recognition of the fiscal challenges facing smaller schools, schools which also tend to have higher levels of poverty. To compare the 'efficiency' via staff to student ratios, or per pupil spending, of a small rural district to a more densely populated district requires that we understand the word "efficiency" to be a *contextual evaluator*. For example, larger populations bring more reasonable places to trim the staff:student ratio while still serving students well. While smaller rural communities may find fewer places to trim the ratio, this does not mean they are spending flagrantly or running their district school inefficiently. The metric must adequately recognize the disparity here, since the metric is specifically addressing a heightened need for support for a class of districts serving smaller more rural populations. To incorporate this consideration within the metric, I suggest that any staff:student ratio target in the SSG metric could be a floating metric that tracks, perhaps, 1.0 above than the current state average.

Additionally, staff:student ratio is not the only measure of operational efficiency. Some districts with high ratios may actually have found creative ways to moderate per pupil spending despite the ratio. If this is the case, they should not be penalized, as they are materially meeting a standard of efficiency. I suggest that while staff:student ratio can be one aspect of the metric, per pupil spending must also be taken into account. For example, when the target ratio has not been met, then a per pupil spending figure less than \$1000 above the state average could be used as a second qualifying metric for a district.

These are rough suggestions, but acknowledging the inherent fiscal challenges of small schools is vital to meeting the equity goals of Act 60. If we gloss over or ignore the inherent disparities among districts, we will end up denying resources to smaller communities (and often economically disadvantaged kids) to funnel these resources back to less rural, more affluent towns. We are responsible for the reasonably foreseen consequences of our actions and decisions. In formulating the new metrics for the SSG, please keep equity issues at the forefront of your decision-making.

Sincerely,

Carin Ewing Park
Chair, Barnard School Board