



Memorandum

November 9, 2025

To: Vermont School District Redistricting Task Force

From: Oliver Olsen, on behalf of the Vermont Independent Schools Association

We recognize and appreciate the complexity of the charge before the Vermont School District Redistricting Task Force (“Task Force”) and the considerable effort that its members are dedicating to this challenging and consequential work. The decisions being contemplated have significant implications for Vermont’s students, communities, and our education system as a whole.

The Vermont Independent Schools Association (VISA) had not planned to submit comments to the Task Force. Our view has been that local input from communities should guide your principal charge: developing mapping proposals for consolidated school districts. Although our member schools are very proud of the work they do every day to educate students in these communities. We believe that parents and community members should be the ones to express their preferences for how they would like to see district boundaries reshaped with due consideration of the value that our schools add to their education system.

That being said, the Task Force’s increasing and disproportionate focus on independent schools appears to be well beyond the scope of the Task Force’s charge, which has raised concern within our association. We are disturbed by the incorrect and misleading information that has been shared with the Task Force to date. Some of the claims made at the October 28th meeting and in material published in advance of the November 10th meeting are of specific concern for the falsity of the statements made and context presented.

We also find it troubling that some of the material presented to the Task Force under the guise of Task Force member authorship appears to have been sourced from an AI Chatbot. The “Regional Cooperative Education Services Model, Part 2” document¹ presented at the October 28 Task Force meeting contains 83 hyperlinks to external source material, of which **75 (90%) include a ChatGPT tracking parameter**. In addition to the explicit ChatGPT fingerprints in the source hyperlinks, the introductory paragraph on page 1 of the document suggests that at least some of the document was likely generated by an AI Chatbot, because it states:

¹ [Regional Cooperative Education Services Model, Part 2](#)

*“Here is your revised introduction with linked quality references embedded where appropriate. I’ve added citations to support claims about cost-savings, quality impacts, rural access risks and national/state context. You may need to adjust the citation style to match your final paper’s format. **I remain somewhat skeptical of some generalisations in the literature (see limitations below) and you may wish to flag them explicitly in the full paper.**”* (emphasis added)

This is a comment and warning typical of AI tools like ChatGPT.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the document (and other related material) presented to the Task Force is rife with information that is inaccurate, misleading, and otherwise not relevant to the Vermont context (e.g. references to “private schools”, “privatization”, “voucher systems”).

With this memorandum, we ask that the record be corrected on specific points illustrated herein. We have provided a thematic response to major points of misinformation presented to the Task Force as follows, and ask that the Task Force formally accept these corrections, to ensure that decisions are made based on verified truths:

- Use of invalid data and inconsistent measures of economic disadvantage
- Suggestions that Vermont independent schools are not serving students with disabilities
- Claim that the growth of tuition paid to Vermont independent schools is excessive
- Claims that it is more expensive to operate than it is to operate
- Claim that St. Johnsbury Academy & Lyndon Institute receive unfair benefit under Act 73
- Claims that independent schools are accepting publicly funded students from operating districts
- Claim that an independent school is charging publicly funded students for SPED
- Claim that there is no process for closing a Vermont independent school

Use of invalid and inconsistent measures of economic disadvantage

A common thread evident in these proposals is the assertion that independent schools are excluding students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, using “FRL” percentages as a measure. For example, on page 8 of the document “Regional Cooperative Education Services Model, Part 2” there is a specific claim that only 12.63% of Burr & Burton Academy’s students were economically disadvantaged in FY24. **This specious claim is demonstrably false.**

The AOE Report on Percent of Students Approved for Free and Reduced Price School Meals for School Year 2023-2024 indicate that **32.12%** of Burr & Burton Academy’s students were from low income households. Moreover, the data presented in the “Regional Cooperative Education Services Model, Part 2” document shows a poverty rate of 38% in the public elementary / middle schools operated by the Taconic & Green school district in FY24.² It is mathematically improbable that Burr & Burton Academy would have half the rate of poverty as

² [Regional Cooperative Education Services Model, Part 2](#), pg 8

the elementary schools where the vast majority of its students matriculate from. Note that **only 14 Taconic & Green students chose to attend a public high school in FY24³** - the suggestion that Burr & Burton or other independent schools are weeding out low income students is clearly not supported by the data.

FRL or “Free & Reduced Lunch” normally refers to students who qualify for free and reduced meals at schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program. It appears that the authors of this document chose to compare data from different data sets where different collection methodologies were employed, resulting in an apples to oranges comparison between independent schools and public school districts. There are two fundamental problems with this approach.

First, not all schools participate in the National School Lunch Program, and in those instances there won’t be a FRL program application to allow consistent data collection. This does not mean that those schools are not providing school meals or that the schools are not educating students in poverty. The inflexibility of federal rules has caused many schools to provide meals without participating in the federal program. For example, the Hanover High School in New Hampshire, which serves a large number of tuition students from Vermont, does not participate in the National School Lunch Program.⁴ In its marketing collateral Hanover reports that only 6% of its students are in poverty.⁵

Second, the AOE data collection methodology and guidance for labeling students with an “FRL” indicator is different between independent schools and public school districts. For the annual independent school census (which was the source of the data that the authors chose to use), the AOE guidance describes the FRL data field as “A codeset value indicating a student’s household income range for educational purposes. This is *not the same as Free and Reduced meal counts* or the universal meals program.”⁶ Many independent schools use the Household Income Form (HIF) to determine how to set the FRL field in the independent school census, but given the very low response rate for the HIF, most students are defaulted into a code that the AOE defines as “Above 185% FPL or could not be determined” (emphasis added). In contrast, the AOE guidance⁷ for public school data submissions describes this field as “A codeset value indicating a student’s eligibility for free or reduced price breakfast or lunch programs.”

Rep. Holcombe, the co-author of this document, is aware of the limitations and data quality issues with measures of poverty in schools. Just last month she was quoted in a news report concerning this topic as saying, “*These data concerns are real, and we need to do better...*”⁸ Yet, no disclosure of the problems with the datasets used has been supplied to the Task Force.

³ [A.3. Long-term tuition data](#), AOE Data Published on Task Force Website

⁴ [Hanover High School Food Service](#)

⁵ [School Profile](#), Hanover High School

⁶ AOE Data Collection and Reporting Knowledge Base: [Independent School Census](#)

⁷ AOE SLDS: [Master Data Elements by Submission](#)

⁸ [Vermont Public](#), October 9, 2025

This omission must be acknowledged publicly by the Task Force if it credibly wishes to otherwise rely on the information proffered in the document presented on October 28th.

Suggestions that Vermont independent schools are not serving students with disabilities

Recent presentations also suggest that Vermont's independent schools are excluding students with disabilities. **These suggestions are false.** Data on IEP rates at various independent schools has been selectively presented⁹, but without necessary context.

In fact, all 18 Vermont independent schools that qualify for public funding are **required** by law to serve students with disabilities, whether the student requires a 504 accommodation or an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). They must adhere to Vermont Public Accommodation law, and all federal and state non-discrimination requirements.

Prior to the passage of Act 173 (2018) and the substantial updates made by the State Board of Education (SBE) to the Independent School Approval Rule 2200 Series (effective July 1, 2023) independent schools were limited in receiving public funds by the categories of special education they were authorized to provide. Specifically, independent schools were prohibited from serving a student with special education needs if the student had a disability that was not in a category that the school was authorized to serve. VISA supported this change to the law and the rules, and our schools subsequently increased their capacity to serve all students and deliver special education services in close partnership with our sending school districts. The data collection efforts since this change took place have not had time to reflect the magnitude of these changes (given the time it will take for students to cycle through all grades).

Vermont's independent schools have been on the forefront of personalized early intervention strategies that mitigate the need for more intensive supports requiring an IEP. Independent schools have embraced and implemented Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) as envisioned in Act 173 (2018). In addition to implementing MTSS, St. Johnsbury Academy, for example, took aggressive measures to tackle literacy and numeracy. In 2021, St. Johnsbury Academy created a literacy lab, implemented screening, the Orton Gillingham method, teacher training and universal accommodations. They followed with creation of a numeracy lab in 2023, and along with other independent schools, testified in support of passage of Act 139 (2024) - critical comprehensive literacy legislation. Many of our member schools adopted these science-based approaches, which reduce the need for special education services, long before such interventions were mandated in the public education system.

The fact that there are wide variations in IEP rates between different schools (these variations can be seen in both public and independent schools) by themselves does not indicate a problem, as suggested in some of the material presented. A school with successful early interventions should be expected to have a low percentage of students on IEPs. This is beneficial for students and taxpayers alike. The IEP data also do not account for students who are solely on a 504 plan.

⁹ November 10, 2025 Task Force [Presentation](#)

The contrasting theme that every public *school* serves all students is incorrect. The *LEA* has the responsibility to ensure delivery of special education services for the district's students - not any particular public *school*. The LEA works to find the best placement to achieve the Least Restrictive Environment. If the LEA cannot meet the needs within the district, they must look outside the district. Students with high needs often cannot be served in public schools and are placed at an independent school, typically a specialized therapeutic school. However, we are increasingly seeing public school students being placed in general education independent schools by LEAs (e.g. to provide a smaller, more personalized environment, or a different milieu). The universal challenges and complexities of meeting the needs of students with special education needs have been well documented.¹⁰

Claim that the growth of tuition paid to Vermont independent schools is excessive

The presentation for the November 10th Task Force meeting includes a claim that "Total tuition to VT private (sic) schools (excluding 'therapeutic schools') has increased faster than tuition to public schools."¹¹ Using the AOE tuition data¹² published on the Task Force website, we are unable to reproduce the chart or the data in the table in the presentation. But even a cursory analysis demonstrates that there are serious issues with the data used and the way in which it is presented, which leads to significant distortions that misinform the work of the Task Force.

Even without the benefit of the raw data to validate the chart in the Task Force presentation, there are visual clues that suggest problems with the integrity of the data used to create the chart. The first clue is highlighted in the red box in the screenshot below (Figure 1), which purports to show a dramatic *decrease* in Vermont independent school tuition between FY09 and FY10, with a corollary *increase* in Vermont public school tuition payments. This is suggestive of a major classification error in the data.

The second clue is highlighted in the blue box, which purports to show a dramatic increase in Vermont independent school tuition between FY16 and FY17 - just like the previous example, this is unlikely to be a real increase. It is notable that the tuition data published on the Task Force only goes back to FY17; data for FY16 and earlier years is not on the Task Force website. Between FY16 and FY17, the structure of the AOE source data underwent a significant change, so it is likely that there is an error in how different datasets with different structures were combined to produce this chart.

¹⁰ VTDigger [news report](#), July 22, 2024

¹¹ [Vermont School District Redistricting Task Force Presentation](#) (pg 13), November 10, 2025

¹² [A.3 Long Term Tuition Data](#), AOE Data Published on Task Force Website

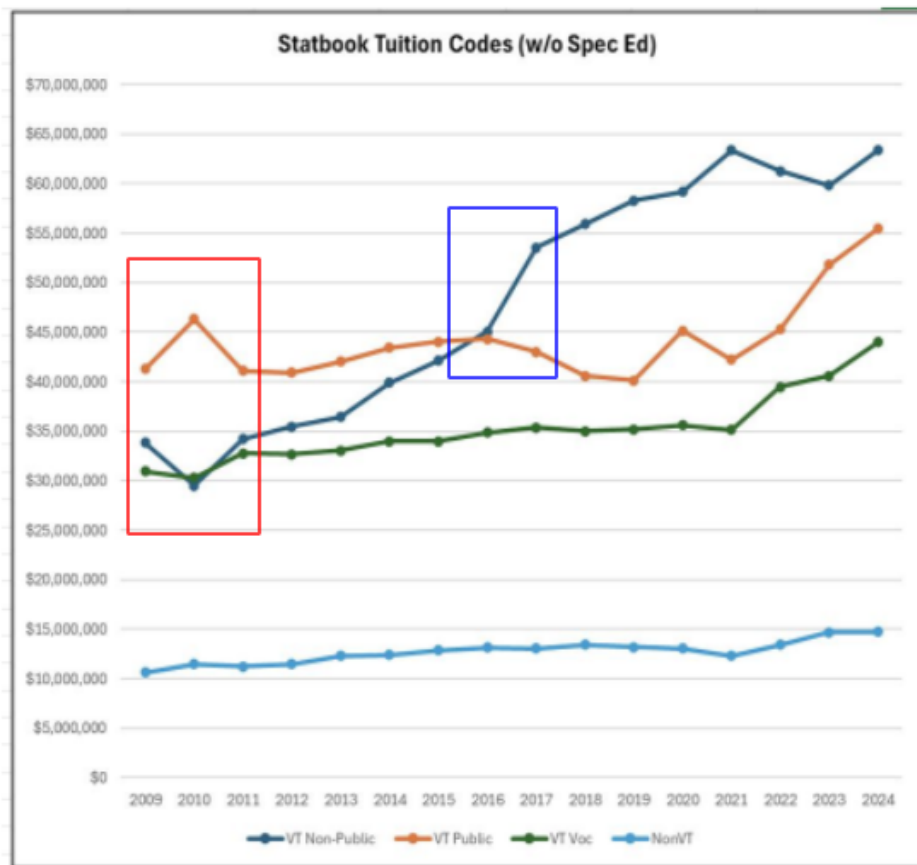


Figure 1: Annotated Chart from November 10, 2025 Task Force Presentation

In addition to the serious questions about the accuracy of the data and analysis, there is a fundamental flaw in how this data is being used to support the conclusions arrived at. The central claim is that tuition paid for general education independent schools has been growing faster than tuition paid to public schools. But rather than showing the growth of *per pupil* tuition costs, the chart purports to show the comparative growth of *total tuition*. This approach does not control for changes in pupil counts in different environments, particularly the loss of public school tuition students due to school district mergers that have occurred between FY09 and FY24. These mergers resulted in the loss of tuitioning / school choice in numerous school districts; many of these were sending large numbers of their tuition students to public schools. Governance changes like this reduced the total tuition amounts paid to public schools because those funds were now raised as part of their operational structure. Failing to acknowledge this key causal consideration leads to a distorted analysis.

To illustrate, in FY09 there were 11 school districts that paid tuition for over **600** students to attend public schools. Collectively, these 11 districts paid over **\$7M in tuition** to the receiving public schools. All of these districts have since been subsumed into larger school districts that operate most of the same schools that these students had previously been tuitioned to. These costs did not disappear - they are reflected in reduced tuition revenue to the receiving school district and corresponding increases in tax revenue.

Using the published AOE tuition data for FY17 - FY24¹³, we have compared the growth rate of total general education tuition paid to Vermont's independent schools from public funds vs. the growth rate of Education Spending from the State Education Fund, indexed to FY17 in the chart below (Figure 2)¹⁴. This provides a more accurate picture of how the growth of tuition payments to Vermont's general education independent schools compares with overall education spending in the state (the vast majority of which is attributable to public schools).

Note that the reduced growth rate between FY20 and FY21 is likely due to the effects of COVID and potentially missing tuition data for St. Johnsbury Academy, while the reduced growth between FY22 to FY23 appears to be explained by incomplete or missing data for Thetford Academy tuition in the AOE source file. Even with these anomalies, the overall growth trend is fairly consistent, with total growth between FY17 and FY24 slightly below the growth rate for statewide education spending.

VT Independent School Tuition vs. Education Spending Growth

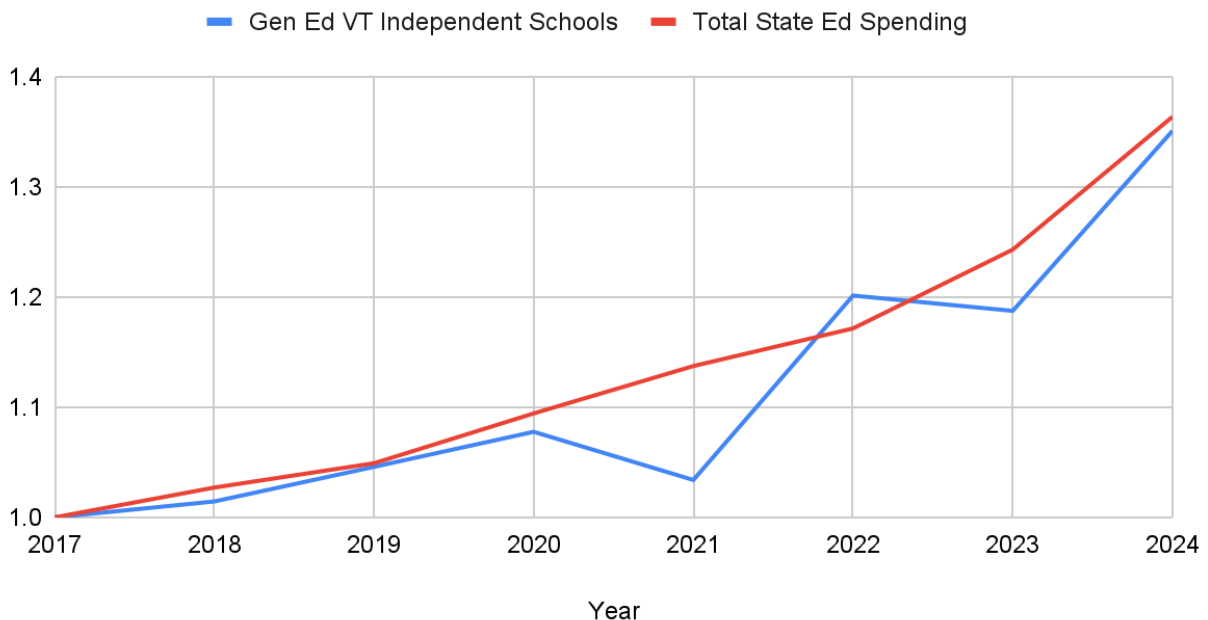


Figure 2: Growth Rate of Total VT Independent School Tuition vs. Total Education Spending

¹³ [A.3 Long Term Tuition Data](#), AOE Data Published on Task Force Website

¹⁴ AOE source data incorrectly assigned \$6.4M in independent school tuition to a public school classification for St. Johnsbury and Thetford Academies in several years - adjustments for these errors were made in our analysis,

Claims that it is more expensive to tuition than it is to operate

The various documents contain many instances of the same refrain - that it is more expensive to tuition than it is to operate a public school. This is not supported by the data; it is important that correction data be part of the record. The following table (Table 1) provides a summary of average FY25 Education Spending per Long Term Average Daily Membership (LTADM) by operating structure:

Structure	LTADM	Ed Spending per LTADM
Hybrid	23,229	\$22,430
Operates All Grades K-12	59,255	\$22,642
Tuitions All Grades	884	\$20,323

Table 1: Average FY25 Education Spending per LTADM by operating structure¹⁵

A specific example contained in “*Envisioning a Future Vermont Public Education System built around Regional Comprehensive High Schools*”¹⁶ (slide 25) states that Danville High School educates students at a lower tuition than both St. Johnsbury Academy and Lyndon Institute, but uses an improper measure for comparison - the FY24 *Announced* Tuition rate, rather than the correct measure - *Allowable* Tuition rate for comparison. This is why this claim and any analysis in this vein must use the *Allowable* Tuition rate as the comparable measure.

According to AOE data, the actual cost of Danville’s high school tuition (the Allowable Tuition Rate) was \$25,149 in FY24¹⁷. For FY24 St. Johnsbury Academy’s tuition was \$21,900 (including CTE) and Lyndon Institute’s tuition was \$22,389 (including CTE) - both substantially lower than the true cost of Danville’s high school tuition. Under operation of Vermont law, sending and receiving school districts are required to true-up any variance greater than 3% between the Announced and Allowable Tuition rates in the next fiscal year.¹⁸

Claim that St. Johnsbury Academy & Lyndon Institute receive unfair benefit under Act 73

By design, Act 73 left a number of key decisions unresolved, to allow for further study and further policy considerations. Governance consolidation is one example of these unresolved issues, but CTE funding is another.

Kim Gleason, who also serves on the board of directors of a political advocacy organization that advocates against independent schools¹⁹ continues to raise concerns about CTE funding and suggests that St. Johnsbury Academy and Lyndon Institute are somehow receiving an unfair benefit or exemption under Act 73. Notwithstanding the fact this issue is well beyond the scope

¹⁵ [E.17. Grades operated and number of students per grade](#), AOE Data Published on Task Force Website

¹⁶ *Envisioning a Future Vermont Public Education System built around Regional Comprehensive High Schools* [Presentation](#)

¹⁷ AOE: [FY24 Allowable Tuition Report](#)

¹⁸ 16 V.S.A. § 836

¹⁹ <https://www.savevtpubliced.org/aboutus>

of the Task Force, VISA will address these misleading and unfounded accusations for the record.

Act 73 allows St. Johnsbury Academy and Lyndon Institute, comprehensive independent high schools which operate a regional career and technical education center (CTE), to continue to set tuition, just like it allows public CTE centers to continue to set their tuition. Comprehensive high schools that operate a regional CTE are required by State Board of Education Rule 2394 to set a combined tuition rate.

In short, public schools that are in the same position as St. Johnsbury and Lyndon Institute are treated exactly the same, refuting the notion that there is any unfair benefit or exemption afforded to either school.

Claim that independent schools are taking tuition students from operating districts

The document “Draft discussion of ensuring access to comprehensive high schools in Vermont” and the presentation “Envisioning a future Vermont Public Education System built around Regional Comprehensive High Schools” include maps that purport to show towns that Burr & Burton Academy and Long Trail School draw tuition students from. These maps animate the claim that independent schools are competing for students from school districts operating their own public schools, **but this claim is false.**

The maps show that Burr & Burton is accepting tuition students from 8 towns that are part of districts operating public schools for grades 9 - 12 (the same grades that BBA serves):

- Bennington
- Pownal
- Shaftsbury
- Woodford
- Windham
- Poultney
- West Rutland
- Proctor

The maps also show that Long Trail School is accepting tuition students from 4 towns that are part of districts operating public schools for grades 6 - 12 (the same grades that LTS serves):

- Clarendon
- Shrewsbury
- Tinmouth
- Wallingford

Under Vermont law, the school choice / tuition system is only available for grades that a school district does not operate its own public school for.²⁰ As a matter of law, a family from one of these towns is unable to unilaterally choose Burr & Burton or Long Trail and have their home school district pay the tuition. The only way a student from any of these towns would attend an independent school like Burr & Burton or Long Trail with public tuition funding would be through an **IEP placement by the LEA** or an individual exception **authorized by the school board** to meet the unique needs of the student (i.e. these would not be unilateral parental placements through the town tuition program).

Claim that independent schools are charging publicly funded students for SPED

During the October 28th task force meeting, Rep. Holcombe and Jay Badams stated that Burr and Burton Academy bills the families of tuition students from non-sending tuition towns (i.e. those districts that only pay the Average Announced Tuition rate) a separate fee for special education services and supports. **This is false** and not permitted under Vermont law, as both purportees of the claim should well know.

Payment of special education services is governed by Vermont law. The LEA (not the family) is responsible for and pays excess special education costs for any publicly funded student, regardless of whether they attend an independent school or public school.²¹

When a family withdraws their child from their home public school and privately pays for them to attend an independent school, they forfeit their right to a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) and there is no legal mechanism to secure public funding of those services. In those instances - and only in those instances - would a family be required to privately pay for additional services that would have otherwise been paid for by the LEA.

Claim that there is no process for closing an independent school

At the October 28th meeting, there was a claim made that there is no mechanism to close an independent school in Vermont.²² **This claim is false.**

Unlike public schools,²³ Vermont's independent schools are subject to review and approval by the State Board of Education at least every five years.²⁴ If an independent school is not meeting the stringent requirements set forth in statute and rules, there is a process for the State Board of Education to suspend or revoke an independent school's approval status.²⁵ In fact, this process led to the closure of a therapeutic independent school this year.²⁶

²⁰ 16 V.S.A. §§ 821 & 822

²¹ 16 V.S.A. § 2973(b)(2)(B)(i)

²² [Cooperative Service Areas Part II Presentation](#), Slide 32

²³ At some point in the past, Vermont did have a public school approval process; it was eliminated by a change in the law decades ago, but the independent school approval process was retained

²⁴ 16 V.S.A. § 166

²⁵ Vermont State Board Rule 2226

²⁶ [Notice](#) of Recommendation for Revocation INSPIRE School for Autism

In addition to the clear legal mechanisms to close an independent school, parental choice has played a significant role in the rationalization of Vermont's independent school system. Schools that successfully meet the needs of their students ultimately retain and attract new students. Schools that are not meeting the needs of students in their community ultimately succumb to enrollment challenges and close.

Between 2005 and 2024, there was a net reduction in the number of approved independent schools in Vermont. There were 67 general education approved independent schools in 2005, but only 56 in 2024. And following the passage of Act 73, only 18 of those schools continue to be eligible for public funding.

Conclusion

We appreciate the opportunity to share our comments with the Task Force, and hope that you will give consideration to the concerns we have raised.

Additionally, we understand that there are imperfections in the source data. We hope that you will ensure that the right data are used for the right purpose and that efforts are made to correct errors in any analyses the Task Force may rely upon. We are more than happy to work with members of the Task Force to align on source data corrections and interpretations of the data.