

By Matt Sutkowski, Burlington Free Press

School administrators and teachers Wednesday urged Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., to support changes to federal education laws that would, in the educators' opinions, make it more fair to schools such as those in Winooski.

Welch toured the John F. Kennedy School and held a roundtable discussion with Winooski educators to solicit opinions on how best to change the federal No Child Left Behind education law. Congress is considering revisions to the measure.

A large proportion of Winooski school students are refugees, and many do not speak English when they arrive. The city's schools have also scored poorly on student assessment tests.

The problem, Winooski High School principal Steve Perkins said, is all students must be tested the same way. So an 11th-grader just starting in an American school must take the same assessment tests as a U.S.-born 11th-grader who has always spoken English. He said it's unfair for a person who has little grasp of the language and the concept of schools to master a test geared toward the average American high school student.

Perkins told Welch a more-useful way to test students is to try something called a personal growth model. Under that system, students would be assessed as they start school, then be assessed again later. If a student shows substantial improvement, that would be considered a success, Perkins said. If not, something would need to be fixed.

Students who are not fluent in English are doomed to fail the current standardized tests, said Inge White, the English language learning director at the school. When the refugee students fail the test, it takes weeks to return them to an equilibrium, she said.

"There are tears. They put down their heads. They get angry. It takes us a couple weeks to calm them down. They say, 'I'm a dummy.' It's hard to start the learning again," White said.

The educators told Welch the basic goal of No Child Left Behind -- holding educators responsible for improving student aptitude -- is valid, and they support it.

However, assistant elementary and middle school principal Robin Hood suggested a tiered system of assessment. For instance, English language learners, special-education students and other students would be tested differently, leading to something closer to an apples-to-apples comparison, she said. The students also would be assessed in the personal growth model Perkins suggested, she said.

Earlier in his visit, Welch sat in on teacher Debra Laforce's first-grade class. Five languages, including Somali Arabic and Nepali, are spoken in the class, Winooski School Superintendent Mary Martineau told Welch.

Martineau said Laforce gets around language barriers while teaching by using lots of visual cues, such as strings of beads that help students learn math.

Welch said he is hopeful some changes to No Child Left Behind would create more accurate measurements of students' educational progress.