

**League of Women Voters NH**  
**Conference on Pre-Kindergarten Education and Charter Schools**  
**Saturday, May 19, 2018**

**Executive Summary**

The LWVNH convened a workshop to raise awareness and educate League members on issues pertaining to public pre-school education and charter schools. This workshop was part of the League's ongoing two year study of education in New Hampshire.

**Pre-Kindergarten Education**

Our exploration of public Pre-K education focused on why Pre-K matters, how it is being implemented across the US, and what the status is in NH. We were joined by an extraordinary group of speakers from academia, government, and the non-profit sector.

Dr. Kimberly Nesbitt from the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at UNH took us through some of the research indicating that a high quality pre-school program (defined as Pre-K education for 3 and 4 year olds) lays a foundation for lifelong health, learning and social well-being, and can provide a return on investment of as much as \$7 to \$1. A positive early childhood experience can lower later special education needs, drop-out rates, and ultimately reduce unemployment and dependence on government assistance. The potential for Pre-K education to reap these benefits is because the early years of a child's life are a particularly sensitive period for brain development.

Access to quality Pre-K has been increasing nationwide, as most states have recognized the benefits and invested public funds. However, New Hampshire is one of six states which do not provide state funding for Pre-K. National data indicate continuing gaps in access: children from lower income families and rural areas are less likely to attend high quality preschool programs. Presumably these gaps exist in NH as well, and are likely exacerbated by a lack of State funds.

We heard from the Vermont Agency of Education on how Vermont raised awareness, passed legislation, and implemented universal access to public Pre-K.

There are some local efforts in NH to expand access to Pre-K. For example, the Portsmouth School Department in collaboration with MomsRising and the NH Charitable Foundation is working on a needs assessment. The town of Bartlett recently voted to fund a full day public school Pre-K for all 3 and 4 year olds. Additionally, there are a number of organizations throughout the State working on early childhood policy initiatives, including Early Learning NH, SPARK NH, a governor appointed Early Childhood Advisory Council, Save the Children, New Futures/Kids Count, and MomsRising. However, the issue does not have much visibility at the State Legislature. Legislators will need background and education on the cost/benefits before investing State funds in public Pre-K education.

**Charter Schools in NH**

The afternoon presentation by Matt Southerton and Matora Fiorey PhD, from the NH Alliance for Public Charter Schools (a non-profit, non-partisan Charter Support Organization), focused on charter schools.

In New Hampshire, charter schools are public schools. There are no for-profit charters in our state. In 2018, 24 schools serve various grade levels and have difference student foci, including high schools for youth at danger of dropping out, students who want to focus on STEM/STEAM or project based learning or arts & design, etc., in addition to the online school called VLACS, often used to supplement courses in other schools. Details can be found on their website: <http://www.nhcharterschools.org/>

State-authorized charter schools receive state per-pupil funding about double that of public schools but receive no local tax money. Locally-authorized charter schools are funded by their local district and receive up to 80% of the district average cost per pupil. State funding for students with Individual Education Plans goes to the resident (home) district, which works with the charter the student attends to provide special education services in a way that makes sense for all. Some charters serve a very high population (up to 87%) of children who qualify for Free/Reduced Lunch (185% or less of poverty level). (State average is 26% of students qualify for free/reduced lunch.)

Charter schools have open enrollment, with a waiting list at about 85% of the schools. Those schools hold lotteries for openings, to determine who will attend each year. A 2014 chart shows greater racial/ethnic diversity in charter schools than in traditional public schools statewide.

Charters are held accountable to parents, students and taxpayers in several ways: charters must file financial reports quarterly and annual broad reports to the Dept. of Education, which conducts financial and program audits regularly. Each charter school must be reauthorized every 5 years. Schools administer the same assessment tests as traditional public schools, and the results are posted on the DOE website. At many charters, parents are more directly involved than at traditional schools. Parents serve on each school's board of directors.

By law 50% or more of charter school teachers must be certified. Charters pay teachers less than other schools; some teachers are retired from public schools, others are coming from other careers. Charter schools cannot own buildings, so classes may be held in a section of a local public school or in leased facilities owned by for-profit or non-profit organizations. Therefore their facilities costs vary widely. They may lack amenities such as indoor gym space or outdoor playgrounds or full kitchens.

In spite of these challenges, parents choose charters for any of several reasons: families come from other states where they had good experiences with charters, or they discover charters on their websites and like what they see in terms of learning styles and programs, or they are dissatisfied with the experiences their children have had in traditional schools.

Several bills in the 2018 legislature dealt with charter schools, but most of them were held for further study or were voted down. It is likely that more bills will be discussed in 2019, including a bill that would give charter schools the right of first refusal for unused district school space (HB1636 in 2018).

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