

Sen. Jay Kahn and Rep. Mel Myler: Sununu proposals won't help public education, taxpayers

By JAY KAHN and MEL MYLER

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It's time to hit the pause button on Gov. Chris Sununu's "Learn Everywhere" and "Career Academies" proposals announced last week. These proposals seem to pull funding away from public schools and stand in contrast to what voters feel is the biggest issue facing N.H. public schools: a lack of state funding and the dependence on property tax revenues.

Unfortunately, the governor brushed over this priority to focus on two programs that likely draw funds away from public schools.

The "Learn Everywhere" proposal was unveiled at a recent State Board of Education meeting by Commissioner Frank Edelblut. The first paragraph defines Learn Everywhere's scope: "shall apply to any for-profit or non-profit entity or individual that offers an educational program that meets minimum standards for approval to grant credit leading to graduation." Because the "Learn Everywhere" programs will be approved by the State Board of Education, not local school boards, this seems like a backdoor apparatus to limit local control for these alternative pathways.

We have locally elected school boards that approve curriculum based on community needs. We need to let them do their jobs, not create more state hierarchies and bureaucracies to divert public dollars that could otherwise be used to support local public schools.

Most educators and legislators agree there should be flexibility in meeting minimum school competencies for graduation. That's why alternative pathways, extended learning opportunities and apprenticeships are already authorized in state statutes – and are defined at the local level. One should be suspect of the desire to use parallel approval processes at the State Board of Education that undermine local control and ultimately lead to state endorsement of for-profit and private-school education.

The "Career Academies" proposal is based on a charter school program in Rochester with Spaulding High School and a large employer, Albany Safran, that hasn't yet graduated a student. It is in fact a certificate degree program within a four-year high school curriculum. It's been turned into a charter school model, one that receives more state funding per student than a public school student. The governor stated we can do this without legislative consideration. We believe that would be a mistake. Questions abound: How many academies? Why are they needed? Will local school boards have input? Who pays the bill? Are we adding administrative costs?

The structure for career academies already exists through concurrent enrollment in the community college system approved courses offered to public high school juniors and seniors. Currently, there are 28 career-technical education centers across the state serving students in all 80 public high schools with courses that accelerate certificate and community college associate degree completion.

A legislative initiative, "Career Readiness Drive to 65," will be considered this session and is designed to enhance, not replace, current structures. This initiative is based on goals articulated by N.H. business

and education leaders over the past three years – to ensure 65 percent of our workforce has a post-secondary, value added credential by 2025. High School Career Readiness credentials would be offered in advanced manufacturing, information technologies, trades apprenticeship programs, nurse assistants and more.

Drive to 65 envisions a holistic approach, whereby in ninth grade, career aspiration assessment would occur so that the high school/community college/advanced placement course mapping could occur prior to 10th grade. Concurrent enrollment access would be expanded to 10th through 12th grades. Additional transcripting capability would verify that students earned a career readiness credential.

The program is designed to accelerate pathways into the workforce, reducing employer costs and risks, and accelerating entry to post-secondary education, reducing the student's cost and time to a college degree. The program will be guided by the state's Advisory Council on Career and Technical Education.

The process by which we improve education in our state is critically important. It's not trying to grab a headline or reinvent the wheel. We're committed to doing the hard work, to work within our existing educational structures to meet local needs – not by creating redundant structures.

The governor's aversion to recurring funding support for public schools is ignoring the voters' top issue – property tax relief. One-time grant funding to public schools offered the last two years isn't a sustainable approach to help property owners or balance school funding inequities. We must make sure the state is meeting its commitments as we consider new programs.

There is time over the next six months for the governor and commissioner to work with the Legislature and educators to do the best we can for N.H. students, employers and taxpayers. The public should expect this from their elected and appointed officials.

(Sen. Jay Kahn, a Keene Democrat, is chairman of the Senate Education and Workforce Development Committee. Rep. Mel Myler, a Contoocook Democrat, is chairman of the House Education Committee.)