

*One point of view on two key education funding bills in the NH Legislature this 2017 session. This piece was written by State Representative Marjorie Porter of Hillsborough, who serves on the Election Law Committee but is obviously following education bills closely. We present this piece as information on **SB193** and **HB647**.*

Text of SB193 can be found here: http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/bill_status/billText.aspx?sy=2017&id=914&txtFormat=html It passed the Senate 13-10, went to Finance committee, will return with full fiscal report for a vote in the Senate on 3/16/17

Text of HB647 can be found here: http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/bill_status/billText.aspx?sy=2017&id=721&txtFormat=html It passed the House on 2/15/17 184-166, is not in House Finance committee who will hold executive session on this and some other education bills on Monday, March 3, beginning at 10 in LOB room 210-211.

Representative Porter writes: I've been serving in the state legislature for a while now, but I am learning new things all the time. Recently, I learned we are magicians. We can change one thing into something entirely different, just by pushing our voting buttons. How do I know? Because just a few weeks ago, both the NH House and the NH Senate, by passing SB 193 and HB 647, turned taxpayer dollars into private funds in the blink of an eye.

The NH constitution is a marvelous document. You can read it online. It is quite specific in what it has to say about the separation of church and state in NH, especially when it comes to funding schools.

Here is what Part I, Article 6 has to say about the matter: “...***But no person shall ever be compelled to pay towards the support of the schools of any sect or denomination ...***”

Seems clear enough to me. Tax dollars can't be used to support religious schools.

This has created a bit of a problem for my Republican colleagues, whose new mission in life is to promote what they glibly call “school choice.” They begin with the assumption that our public schools are failing, although *US News and World Report's* recent Best States ranking seems to contradict that. They just rated NH's public schools the best in the nation. *

They continue by saying parents should have a choice about which school their children attend.

Parents already have that choice. There are charter schools, and private schools, and religious schools all over the state, and parents now can choose to send their children there.

Ah, but the right to choose schools is not enough. Choice proponents want to use our taxpayer dollars to pay the cost of sending these children to private and religious schools.

Here's where that pesky constitution gets in the way, and where the magic comes in.

In order to avoid violating the constitution concerning religious school support, somehow those taxpayer dollars need to not be taxpayer dollars any more. They need to be somehow changed into private funds, which parents can spend on education any way they choose.

Enter the private, “charitable” scholarship-granting organization, and the very cleverly named “education freedom savings account.”

Parents open one of these accounts with the scholarship organization. The state then gives 95% of state adequacy aid per child to the organization. The organization keeps 5% and deposits the other 90% into the parents' account.

And *presto-chango!* Like magic, your taxpayer dollars, **my** taxpayer dollars, are changed into private funds, which can be spent on any educational things, including religious schools.

Amazing! By a simple transfer to an outside account! (I may be a bit naïve, but isn't this what we call money laundering when drug dealers do it?)

Look, I am not against people having choices in education. I ran a small, private preschool and kindergarten for years. Not all kids fit in all settings, I get that. But I do have some serious concerns about this recent push to defund public schools under the guise of “freedom of choice.”

Our public schools are the foundation of our democracy. NH has struggled for decades to fund them in a fair and equitable way. Those funds are limited, and forcing public schools to share them with private schools is simply unfair. Our local superintendent estimates if these bills are signed into law as written, it will cost our local school district more than \$600,000—even before any of our currently enrolled students make use of it. How will this improve things?

We will be losing control over our tax dollars. Public schools have public school boards, elected by and answerable to the taxpayer. We get to approve the budget, and we get to examine how each and every dollar is spent. We can vote board members out of office if we are not happy with the job they are doing.

Not so at private schools. They have private boards over which the public has no say. The public has no say over the budget, or how money is spent.

Private schools do not have to accept all kids, as public schools do. They can reject those they find “unsuitable.” Think about what that means.

Proponents say these “scholarships” will help poor kids get a choice too. Ninety percent of adequacy aid is about \$3100. Tuition at Bishop Brady is \$11,400; at Derryfield it’s \$30,900; at the Well School [in Peterborough] it’s \$8800, and at St. John’s it’s \$5660. Add to that the cost—and time—needed for transportation back and forth. Who do you think will be taking advantage of these scholarships? All kids? Or is this just a tax break for the wealthiest?

Public schools are held to strict standards. They must hire highly qualified, certified teachers. They are required to use objective measures to show their students are indeed learning, and they are held responsible if progress is not being made.

Private schools can hire non-certified teachers, and they don’t have to use any accountability measure to show their students are learning. If we send our public money to them, we will have no way of knowing if they are using it well and wisely.

When we moved to Hillsborough all those years ago, we lived on a town maintained dirt road. The town plowed us in the winter, and graded the ruts out after mud season. Our taxes paid for that. But our neighbors lived on a private road. They had made the choice to live there because it better served their needs. The town did not maintain it, although they would have if it were brought up to town standards. Our neighbors chose not to do that. They took care of it themselves. They DID NOT come to the town and ask for taxpayer money to help them. Nor should they have.

They town provides us with public roads and public schools. The taxpayers fund them. You have the right to live on a private road, or to send your child to a private school, but please don’t use my tax dollars to do so.

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* <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/rankings> NH is #2 overall in the quality of life issues listed, #3 in education overall, but **#1 in pre-K thru 12 education**: <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/new-hampshire>