

Vouchers for the wealthy

Republicans pitch another plan to raise our property taxes with ‘school choice’ bill

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MARK FERNALD
Guest Commentary
mark@markfernald.com

Take \$63 million from the public schools and give it to people whose children do not go to public school.

That, in a nutshell, is what Senate Bill 193 would do. The bill was approved by the Republican majority in the New Hampshire Senate last week, and now moves to the House.

Republicans want to promote “*school choice*.” The state provides \$3,561.27 in funding for each student in grades 1-12 in a New Hampshire public school. SB193 would divert 90 percent of that amount, or \$3,205.14, to parents of “*eligible children*” to be used to pay for home schooling expenses or for any private school.

Under SB193, for every child who is home schooled, or in a charter/private school, money is taken from the public school system.

There are currently 3,420 children enrolled in charter schools. As of 2014, there were 5,914 home-schooled children. If SB193 becomes law, over \$25 million would be immediately diverted away from public schools.

Parents of students currently in private school would not be able to tap this money because their children are not defined as “*eligible*.” However, the money would be available to students moving from any kindergarten to a private school, and students moving from any public school to a private school. Eventually all students in private school would receive the

state subsidy, because eventually all of them will have moved from kindergarten or from a public school. This includes students going to boarding schools.

There are almost 17,000 children enrolled in private schools in New Hampshire. Assuming 5,000 of them are out-of-state children going to a New Hampshire boarding schools, that leaves 12,000 who will receive the state subsidy as students move to private school and become “*eligible*” – another \$38 million diverted from the public schools.

If the state subsidy encourages parents to move their children in private schools, millions of additional dollars would be drained from the public schools.

We all know what happens when money is drained out of public schools. Property taxes go way up.

In 2009, the Legislature eliminated school building aid, shifting nearly \$43 million to property taxpayers.

The Legislature eliminated the state’s contribution to the cost of teacher retirement (as well as the retirement of municipal workers), shifting about \$80 million to property taxpayers.

School adequacy funding was set at \$825 million in 1999, in the wake of the Claremont decisions of the New Hampshire Supreme Court. In the intervening 17 years, inflation has risen by 37 percent. Adequacy funding has risen just 25 percent (after adjusting for the decline in the school population). That 12 percent gap represents \$98 million of additional property taxes each year.

In 2010, the Legislature eliminated revenue sharing payments from the state to the cities and towns, increasing property taxes by \$25 million.

Since 1999, total property taxes paid in New Hampshire has more than doubled. Not many people have seen their income double.

SB193 would make our property taxes worse by draining tens of millions of dollars from public education. Most of the diverted money would go to

well-off families who need no subsidy to send their children to places like Derryfield or Holderness. Poorer families would not be given new opportunities because the amount of the “*grant*” is just a fraction of the cost of a typical private school.

The Republican proponents of SB193 say that competition between public and private schools will improve education. In America, we believe in competition, but we also believe in fair competition. If the playing field is not level, the outcome does not tell us which was superior. It only confirms that the process was rigged.

Public schools have to meet state standards. Private schools and charters do not.

Public schools have to accept all students and provide special education to those that need it. Private schools and charters can select their students and can decide not to offer special education.

Public schools offer a wide range of courses and extra-curricular activities. Private and charter schools can limit what they offer, but the public schools are required by law to make their courses and extra-curricular activities available to students from private and charter schools, and to home-schooled students.

The goal of our public schools is a good education for every child.

Competition could be a path to that goal, so long as the competition is fair.

If we create a system that is truly competitive and fair – with every school receiving public money meeting the same standards – I think we would find that our public schools do very well, and that most private and charter schools would not be interested in participating.

Mark Fernald, of Peterborough, is a former state senator and was the 2002 Democratic nominee for governor. He can be reached at mark@markfernald.com.