

**AFT-NH Testimony on HB 1561 Expanding school vouchers to categories of students
From Debrah Howes, President AFT-NH**



Thank you, Chair Ladd and Members of the House Education Committee.

My name is Debrah Howes. I am president of the American Federation of Teachers – New Hampshire. I am here to speak on behalf of our 3700 members across the state. Our members include preK through 12 public school educators and support staff, university faculty as well as town employees. I am here today to testify in opposition to **HB 1561** expanding school vouchers to categories of students.

Our Granite State students need so much right now: stability, academic challenges and supports to meet their learning needs, and safe and welcoming schools where every student belongs, feels valued and can learn. Our kids and communities need real solutions and real investment in our neighborhood public schools. Poll after poll, not to mention the 2023 school board and municipal elections, show that Granite State parents and families value, trust and want to invest in their local public schools and its staff so that students can learn, grow and thrive.

They don't want culture wars and privatization decimating our public schools. They want public schools that are safe and supportive for all students and that provide a robust curriculum and the resources needed to help young people grow and thrive. They want their kids to get a well-rounded education, develop strong fundamental academic and life skills, and have pathways to career, college and beyond. That's what families across the Granite State and across America want for their kids. What are New Hampshire children getting instead, from some in this legislature? Yet another raft of voucher expansion bills that will devastate funding for public schools, attack the vital role public schools play as the heart of our communities – and actually help very few children. All this to fund a voucher strategy that research, and experience have proven to be an abject failure.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: There is no upside to vouchers. Independent studies of voucher programs in states across the country have [found](#) that children in voucher programs perform far worse than their peers. In fact, education researchers who study vouchers say their [negative effects](#) are larger than natural crises like Hurricane Katrina and the COVID-19 pandemic. In state after state, vouchers have led to achievement declines. But some NH lawmakers want to double down on this failure. This bill is a perfect example of that: It's a universal voucher bill in thin disguise.

The bill's expanded eligibility conditions prove it. For example, one of the voucher eligibility standards under this proposed bill is being "concerned that attending school could lead to the spread of contagious diseases"—including the common cold and the flu!

What's especially cynical about this bill is that it pretends to care about the very children whom far right extremists have worked to make feel unwelcome and not included by trying to pass laws and policies that single them out for different treatment at school or even erase their experiences and deny their existence. Instead of investing in the strategies and supports students need to thrive in our public schools, the bill adds being lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, or non-binary to student voucher eligibility qualifications. It attempts to "peel off" families of these students from their school communities, with false promises of an inclusive, high-quality

education that \$5,000 a year will never deliver—not here, not anywhere in America. (In fact, [too often](#), private schools that accept vouchers deny admission to, discipline or expel LGBTQIA+ students and students with LGBTQIA+ family members. [Many also](#) teach anti-LGBTQIA+ curricula, including conversion therapy.)

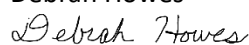
Expanding New Hampshire’s school voucher program won’t help any child who needs our support. This bill will only fatten up an already costly voucher program and be yet another stumbling block to solving the state funding crisis for our neighborhood public schools. We already have a huge problem where the state is not meeting its constitutional obligation to all Granite State students to provide the opportunity for a robust public education in all school districts. Draining more money from the state’s coffers to pay for some parents’ private educational choices does nothing to help the state meet its duty to provide a robust public educational opportunity for all. And make no mistake, the [86 %](#) of Granite State students whose families rely on neighborhood public schools to educate their children want those schools well-funded, well-resourced and fully staffed by caring professional educators so their children can learn, grow and thrive. Funding the existing school voucher program makes it harder to provide the well-rounded public school education every Granite State child has a right to. Expanding the school voucher program, at an estimate of \$83 million in new spending in fiscal year 2025 alone, increases the size of the problem exponentially and it is the students and the local property taxpayers who suffer.

And let’s be honest, who benefits most from this bill? It’s not Granite State students. It’s a transparent tax subsidy to rich families who are [already](#) sending their children to pricey private schools! Under this bill, wealthy families can pocket almost \$5,000 in state voucher money every year—which will come in very useful to cover their country club memberships but do nothing to help families living in poverty afford a quality private education. \$5,000 a year does not pay tuition at Phillips Exeter or St. Paul’s. It’s a cruel hoax to pretend it does. As we have already seen, mostly school vouchers benefit families [already](#) giving their children private schooling or homeschooling. As one think tank described it, vouchers are [education welfare](#) for the wealthy! Here in New Hampshire, [figures from March 2022](#) show that only about 11 percent of ESA recipients had been in public school the previous year. Likewise in other states: In December 2023, the Wall Street Journal [reported](#) that: In Florida, out of the 120,000 students newly enrolled in the state’s expanded school choice program, 69% were already in private school. In Iowa, among the first group of 17,000 students approved for ESAs, 60% came from private schools. In Arizona, 2023 [study](#) found that ESA students only rarely came from low-income parts of the state.

I urge you to vote no on **HB 1561**. Our kids deserve better than this. We need to stop wasting state money, stop subsidizing wealthy families who neither need or are asking for this money, and stop underfunding the neighborhood public schools that students and families are counting on more than ever right now. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Debrah Howes



President, AFT-New Hampshire