



AFT-NH Testimony on SB 341
From Debrah Howes, President AFT-NH

Thank you, Chair Ward and Members of the Senate 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. Our members include PreK through 12 public school educators and support staff, university faculty as well as town employees across the Granite State. We have several concerns with **SB 341**.

This bill seems simple: if a parent asks a question about a student, the teacher or school employee must answer “completely and honestly” in writing. That simplicity is deceptive and there are several concerns with it.

To start with, that seemingly simple standard is vague. There is no definition in this bill or in statute of what “completely and honestly” means, which can lead to confusion over exactly how much of what a school employee knows needs to be reported.

- Do you need to disclose only direct statements the student has made to you?
- Do you disclose actions and behaviors you have observed, which is subject to interpretation?
- How much should you pay attention to student fashion choices to report them to parents, who might consider them an important marker of an alteration of self-expression?
- Do you report what other students have said about a student? What if those students were actually trying to bully or harass another student by making false claims, and you pass that information on as something you have heard?

This law could actually lead to parents being misinformed because school employees are trying to tell everything they know or think they might know for fear of being accused of not meeting that “complete and honest” standard!

That leads to the second concern. This bill will add to the climate of fear amongst school employees by requiring disciplinary action including termination for those who violate a vague and hard to follow standard. The bill would overrule the progressive discipline models negotiated between unions and local school boards in most collective bargaining agreements. It mandates a specific path for parent complaints to take and gives employees no rights of appeal. It is already hard enough to recruit teachers and school staff and retain the ones that are working. This is one more state mandate interfering in the public school, creating a climate of fear that doesn’t help students learn.

The third concern is that if you pass this bill, students will know teachers and school staff are obligated to tell parents “completely and honestly” about anything they say or do in school and will feel under surveillance at all times at school. That is not conducive to any student being able to learn and thrive!

The focus of public schools should be on creating welcoming, inclusive classroom communities where every student belongs and can learn and thrive. It should be about providing a challenging curriculum, learning through doing and individual attention from the teacher. It should be on giving students academic support when they need it. Parents and teachers should work together to support students, but the focus has to be on how the student is succeeding with the curriculum and in the classroom community.

That is what Granite Staters truly want, and they have shown in local school board elections across the state. They want parents and teachers working together as true partners. They want them focused on helping public school students learn and thrive. They don't want a climate of threats and intimidation in our public schools.

For these reasons I urge you to find SB 341 Inexpedient to Legislate.

Sincerely,

Debrah Howes

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President, AFT-New Hampshire

