



AFT-NH Testimony on SB 522
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 across the state. Our members include PreK through 12 public school educators and support staff, university faculty as well as town employees across the Granite State. I am here today to oppose **SB 522**.

We are firm believers in the benefits of early childhood education. If children have the opportunity to play, explore the world, hear great stories read out loud, have conversations, build their oral vocabulary, sing songs and rhymes, count, match and sort objects, take turns and all the other activities of a quality pre-K experience, they will enter school more ready for formal academics. That makes them more successful as students and eventually more engaged and productive as citizens. With all the good that a quality pre-K experience can bring to students, we still oppose **SB 522** for two main reasons.

The first reason is that to fund this program, the bill would take money out of an existing childcare scholarship program that is relied on by many low-income Granite State families already to ensure that they have access to safe, high-quality childcare that they can afford. This program is operated through the Department of Health and Human Services and pays the scholarships directly to approved childcare operations to ensure that there are safe, stable and healthy places for children to be looked after each day where they are engaged in the kind of programming described above. Taking away that childcare scholarship program to start a new pre-K voucher program through the Department of Education would endanger the stability of the childcare arrangements those families are now using. If the current childcare operators don't have enough children placed with them, they can't stay in business, and every family using that childcare loses.

The second reason we oppose this bill is that it is offering quality PreK, but only for some students. All Granite State students would benefit from high quality public PreK if their parents chose to send them. If you were looking to offer quality PreK as part of a constitutionally mandated opportunity for a public education, AFT-NH would certainly be supporting that! But as a voucher for only a few children between the ages 2 ½ and 5 whose families meet the income requirements, while leaving many not offered the opportunity of high quality PreK through their public schools, AFT-NH cannot support this bill.

As a voucher program, the biggest problem with **SB 522** is that it focuses on the needs of some students without focusing on the needs of all students. There are about 5000 students in K through 12 currently receiving school vouchers and about 160,000 students in public district schools. Funding the voucher program is a choice the New Hampshire Legislature has made. Funding public schools is a constitutional duty, which the NH Legislature is currently shortchanging by \$537,000,000 a year.

New Hampshire has a constitutional duty to provide and fund a robust public education through its public district schools. This constitutional duty has been enumerated through court cases going back 30 years.

That opportunity has to be as robust in Claremont, Franklin, and Berlin as it is in Windham, Hanover, and Bedford and the tax burden on local property taxpayers in each district must be equally light, or heavy. It is long past time for the NH Legislature to focus on the needs of all the 160,000 students who attend our public district schools, and their parents who choose to send them there, and the local property taxpayers who have been overburdened in many towns by the state's shortchanging.

Every student in the Granite State deserves a welcoming, inclusive classroom where they can learn, grow and thrive. Every Granite State student deserves small class sizes, individual attention from the teacher and learning support from paraeducators. Every Granite State student deserves student centered, hands on and experiential learning to spark that joy of lifelong learning. This can't happen until the NH Legislature meeting its constitutional duty to all its students.

For these reasons I urge you to find **SB 522** Inexpedient to Legislate.

Sincerely,

Debrah Howes

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President, AFT-New Hampshire