

Senate Education Committee

Trevor Currier 271-4151

HB 1358, establishing a commission to study transitioning all public schools to public charter schools.

Hearing Date: April 21, 2026

Time Opened: 9:15 a.m.

Time Closed: 9:55 a.m.

Members of the Committee Present: Senators Ward, Sullivan, Abbas and Altschiller

Members of the Committee Absent : Senator Prentiss

Bill Analysis: This bill establishes a commission to study transitioning all public schools to public charter schools.

Sponsors:
Rep. Osborne

Who supports the bill: 7 People signed in support of HB 1358. To see the full list of sign-ins, please email the committee aide (trevor.currier@gc.nh.gov).

Who opposes the bill: 390 People signed in opposition to HB 1358. To see the full list of sign-ins, please email the committee aide (trevor.currier@gc.nh.gov).

Who is neutral on the bill: 1 Person signed in neutral to HB 1358. To see the full list of sign-ins, please email the committee aide (trevor.currier@gc.nh.gov).

Summary of testimony presented in support:

Representative Katy Peternel – *Carroll 6*

- Representative Peternel introduced House Bill 1358 on behalf of Representative Osborne.
- Representative Peternel state the HB 1358 would create a commission to study transitioning all public schools to public charter schools.
- Representative Peternel explained that the intent of the bill is to explore this possible transition. She added that the idea stems from the charter school funding model and parental involvement in charter school programs.

- Representative Peternel stated that the number of committee members is intentionally limited to ensure the commission can effectively do its work and added that the commission can invite any experts it wishes.
- She stated that Representative Osborne has received input from at least 2 constituents who support this commission.

Representative Clayton Wood – *Merrimack 13*

- Representative Wood explained that Pittsfield has a terrible school district that could benefit from conversion to a public charter school system.
- He explained that this problem is no longer solvable through the local school board elections.
- Representative Wood stated that charter schools operate like a business and that businesses are never allowed to go millions of dollars into debt.
- He shared his experiences, noting that school boards and SAUs are ineffective and filled with bureaucracy.
- Representative Wood stated that he would prefer not to wait for a study commission and to implement the transition now.
- **Senator Sullivan** asked Rep. Wood to describe the funding mechanisms for charter schools. He explained that there is a flat rate of 9,300 dollars from the state and that charter schools receive no funds from municipalities.

Summary of testimony presented in opposition:

Debrah Howes - American Federation of Teachers New Hampshire

- Ms. Howes stated that while public charter schools have a valid place in public education, they are often mission-focused schools and are not meant to serve all students.
- She stated that many charter schools are established to provide an alternative for students in an unsuitable learning environment or with different educational goals.
- Ms. Howes stated that New Hampshire has a constitutional duty to maintain a robust and well-funded school system.
- She raised the concern that this bill is taking away from the problems in New Hampshire related to raising funds for school districts.
- She stated that there are many districts where students are not receiving the constitutionally appropriate level of funding.
- **Senator Sullivan** asked if it is Ms. Howes' belief that students are not getting a great public education in New Hampshire. Ms. Howes responded that some districts have fewer opportunities for a robust education due to resource constraints. She added that many districts are cutting back on educators and

educational programs. Ms. Howes attributed the shortfall to New Hampshire's failure to fulfill its constitutional duty to fund an adequate education statewide.

- **Senator Sullivan** asked whether this model would provide equal opportunity and equal funding statewide. Ms. Howes responded that the charter school model requires local districts to provide 80% of charter school funding and that towns will not be able to meet that requirement for all schools.

Sarah Thorne

- Ms. Thorne acknowledged problems with the current public school system; however, she did not believe that HB 1358 was the right solution.
- She expressed concern that this bill, along with many others from previous years, creates an atmosphere of uncertainty for families and prospective educators.
- Ms. Thorne explained that she would not have become an educator in New Hampshire if this type of legislation had been in the works when she started.
- She explained that this bill would reduce the number of qualified and certified educators in New Hampshire, affecting families who are coming to and staying in the state.
- Ms. Thorne stated that this is not just the establishment of a study commission but also a strong message to educators and families.
- **Senator Sullivan** asked what message this would send to educators and families. Ms. Thorne responded that the message is that there is significant uncertainty and change in the future of education in New Hampshire. She added that this bill does not make New Hampshire seem like a welcoming place for new families and teachers.
- **Senator Sullivan** asked if it is positive to be looking at the whole public school system. Ms. Thorne responded that charter schools can play a role in public education but should not replace the entire public education system.
- **Senator Ward** asked whether Ms. Thorne has considered the families who would like a different form of education for their student. Ms. Thorne responded that options are needed, but provisions already exist. She added that the state should not be looking to switch to a system that discards the current operations of public schools.

Mary Wilke

- Ms. Wilke stated that she agrees that public charter schools are fundamentally different from public schools.
- She raised the concern that public charter schools are not overseen by a board of elected officials and are less transparent than public schools.

- Ms. Wilke noted that the majority of members of both the Senate and the House are quick to say that “the voters are their boss,” while also not considering online sign-ins and testimony presented at hearings.
- Ms. Wilke explained that she has no stake in this bill, but her opinion should still be considered just as much as those who do.
- She stated that there are about 154,000 students in public schools and about 7,500 who are interested in or enrolled in charter schools. She explained that this shows that the people of New Hampshire don’t want universal charter schools.
- Ms. Wilke agreed with the section of the legislation that called for examining funding models to reduce reliance on local property tax, but stated that this does not have to be done in connection with transitioning all public schools to public charter schools.
- She expressed concern that the commission would consist only of Republican officials.
- **Senator Sullivan** noted that these commissions are typically bipartisan, regardless of the party of the House Speaker or Senate President, and that the political affiliation of the Commissioner of Education is unknown. Ms. Wilke responded that she has seen bills establishing commissions that include both majority- and minority-party elected officials.
- **Senator Ward** commented that commissions are always created to include members from both political parties.

Brian Hawkins - National Educators Association NH

- Mr. Hawkins stated that this transition would be a significant change and that the number of members on the commission should reflect its magnitude.
- He explained that the commission’s charge did not include the possible negative consequences of the proposed transition, only the positive aspects.
- Mr. Hawkins expressed concern about the deadline proposed in the bill. He believed the commission would need significantly more time.
- He stated that there are options for alternative schooling at the local level under current law.
- **Senator Ward** noted that the turnaround is short, so that if meaningful information is found, a bill or recommendations can be proposed in the next session. Mr. Hawkins responded that the commission's charges are inadequate.
- **Senator Altschiller** noted that the bill does not account for the history of how our state's education model came to be and asked Mr. Hawkins to explain the bill's inequities. Mr. Hawkins responded that the bill should specify whether the transition is a state-board-approved model or locally approved charters, and address transportation and special education issues. He added that the

retirement system and staffing would also likely change under a statewide charter school system.

- **Senator Sullivan** asked how many NEA members work in charter schools. Mr. Hawkins responded that no NEA members are employed by charter schools in New Hampshire.

Heather Barker

- Ms. Barker stated that she has no problem with study commissions but has a concern about the proposed transition because she is unsure whether the 9,300 allocated for charter school students would adequately meet the needs of all students.
- She explained that to properly equip charter schools to deliver services to special education students would be a heavy burden on the local taxpayer.
- Ms. Barker stated that she fully supports the idea of school choice, but that it is already codified in statute and includes a wide variety of options.
- She stated that there are no members on the commission who represent students in special education or students with economic disadvantages.
- Ms. Barker explained that there is no problem with exploring the benefits of a certain change, but that the negative aspects must be studied as well.

Neutral Information Presented: None.