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Re: HB 748, establishing a local education freedom account program

Good morning, Chair Representative Cordelli and honorable members of the House Education Policy and Administration Committee. Thank you for hearing my testimony.

I am a public educator with over thirty years teaching in NH public schools and am currently teaching as an adjunct in the Community College System. I am also a member of the Economic Justice Ministry of the NH Conference of the United Church of Christ.

I firmly believe in public education as the bedrock of our democracy and for providing every child – regardless of need or talent, background or financial backing, special need or any other designation – an equal opportunity for success, for learning to become independent, educated, contributing members of our society. Public tax dollars should be supporting public schools which are there for all children, as required by law and the belief that government exists to serve the common good. Public schools cannot discriminate against children because they are poor, homeless, have special needs, have behavior or emotional or learning differences and challenges, have complicated medical needs, have communication challenges because of deafness or speech impediments or not being native English speakers. Public schools are expected and required to rise to all these challenges and more with specially trained and certified personnel, with multiple programs to address the needs of students – from all levels of special education to career education to advanced placement courses and everything in between. Every public school student is expected to be educated to become critical thinkers and problem-solvers with good communication skills and the soft skills valued by employers and our society to work cooperatively, be empathetic, be self-initiated. Public schools do all this and more.

This bill seeks to make sure that everything that public schools already provide can be paid for at the program or school of the parent's choosing by taking public school dollars and diverting them to the parent's chosen venue for educating their child. This will come at a huge cost to the local public school district and the local community. The mandates on public education, listed above, will still need to be met – but with fewer dollars. We know that public schools educate nearly 90% of New Hampshire children. We know that taking even 10% of the children out of a school district will not lower costs by 10% because there are many fixed costs – maintaining buildings, providing transportation, administration, and even personnel. Unless all the students come from one grade, in one school, rarely can teachers be cut and still provide the same quality of education.

This bill seeks to take money out of the public schools to pay for selected private education – to the benefit of one child at the cost to many children. Most of the children in private education were already there at their parents' expense. Now they are taking advantage of state educational freedom accounts. This bill would expand that advantage to include local tax dollars.

Our public schools are already underfunded and struggling financially. Pencil sharpening on budgets happens continuously – department heads asking teachers to keep costs down, principals asking departments to level fund or cut budgets even in the face of rising costs, superintendents asking

principals to do more with less, budget committees and school boards pressuring superintendents to stretch dollars. All this is before the budget is presented to the taxpayers.

EFA's, or vouchers, already burden local school districts and communities. The largest portion of property tax bills is to pay for education. As a local budget committee member, I can testify that towns are sharpening their pencils as they write their budgets to serve their towns as best as possible while also assuring that taxes are kept down, in anticipation of county and school taxes rising. These local EFA's will further raise local school taxes, which will further raise local property taxes. We already have senior citizens who fear they will not be able to afford to stay in the homes where they have lived for decades. We have young people who cannot afford to rent or buy in the towns they grew up in. Governor Ayotte has stated that local municipalities need to shoulder more costs for state programs.

This bill further impacts local property owners – and renters – by raising taxes. The sponsors of this bill tout freedom and the best education for children without realizing – or maybe caring – that their bill will further undermine public education and further undermine the stability of local communities. With the EFA program allowed to discriminate against the rights of children and to operate without transparency and accountability, this expansion of the EFA program is irresponsible and unethical. This local voucher program is, at the very least, a tax on local property owners, proposed by the Republicans who say they are against raising taxes.

Please vote HB 748 inexpedient to legislate.