

AFT-NH Testimony opposing HB1358
From Debrah Howes, President AFT-NH
Feb 24, 2026



To Chairman Noble and members of the House Education Policy and Administration Committee

My name is Debrah Howes, President of the American Federation of Teachers–NH. I write on behalf of our 3,500 members who work in preK through grade 12 public education, in public services, and in private and public universities across the Granite State. We are taxpayers and citizens of New Hampshire, and many of us are parents or grandparents of public-school students.

On behalf of my members and the students and communities we serve, I urge you to reject **HB 1358**.

HB 1358 creates a commission to study transitioning all public schools into public charter schools. It also, immediately upon passage, makes it far easier to convert an individual public school into a charter school by replacing the two-thirds district vote at a local school meeting with a simple majority vote at the biennial state general election.

Moving this consequential, community altering, and for students potentially life changing decision from a local school meeting where everyone in attendance is focused on education and property tax rates to the general election greatly diminishes genuine local control. Voters lose the chance to deliberate together, ask questions which deserve detailed and informed answers from their school leaders, and weigh consequences in a forum designed for district governance. A statewide ballot takes away the opportunity for that kind of discussion and information sharing. It buries what is rightfully a local decision amongst a myriad of other offices on the ballot and increases the risk of hasty conversions that a divided community does not truly support. This is not what is best for our communities or our students!

In addition, New Hampshire is not ready to fund an expanded number of charter schools, so studying the process or making it easier to achieve is entirely premature. The state still fails to provide sufficient and equitable state funding, so every student can access a high-quality public education without overburdening local property taxpayers. Launching a study of wholesale charter conversion before fixing adequacy is the very definition of putting the cart before the horse.

HB1358 invites the commission it would create to consider whether charter conversion could relieve strain on local property taxpayers. In reality, charter students receive higher state per

pupil grants than district students, but charter conversions still require the local district to fund at least 80% of the per pupil budget they had previously funded. And when considering State revenue, charter schools get nearly double the per pupil aid that district schools get. Expanding a more expensive state model without first repairing the adequacy formula risks increasing state costs while leaving districts with fixed expenses, shrinking enrollment, and less revenue. That pushes **more pressure** onto local taxpayers. Students who remain in district schools feel the cuts first through larger classes, fewer offerings, and reduced services.

Lowering the conversion threshold also creates instability for students. Sudden changes in governance, staffing models, and school culture disrupt learning. Learners who need additional support are hit hardest. Stability and qualified educators are the bedrock of quality. At a time of teacher shortages, signaling system wide charter conversion undermines the professionals we are struggling to recruit and retain. Students will pay the price.

Here is the reason the state funding its full constitutional share of public education so there are robust learning opportunities for every student in every public school district matters:

Let me tell you about a student I know. Maya is a seventh grader who is a little below grade level in reading comprehension but works very hard. She is not a Special Education student but last year Maya got help from a Reading Intervention teacher along with some other students who were struggling with comprehension. The targeted lessons helped her fill in some gaps in her reading skills and work more confidently in her classes. Maya also loved her intermural sports last year. It helped her make friends and adjust to being in the big middle school. However, due to insufficient funding from the state and increased pressure on local property taxpayers, both the Reading intervention program at the middle school and the intermural sports were cut for this year. Maya does not need the state to conduct a school governance experiment. She needs stable funding, smaller classes in core subjects, the academic support that was helping her catch up on gaps in her skills, and the educators who know her.

Now let's look at this from the perspective of a local property taxpayer. I recently spoke with Carol, a retired paraprofessional who spent her career supporting students with special needs in our public schools. She is a steadfast supporter of public education, and she votes for her school budget to support the students getting what they need to learn and thrive. She also lives on a fixed income and her property taxes have climbed to the point where she has to choose between medication refills and home repairs. She told me she wants strong schools, not ballot questions that move decisions away from local meetings and risk new costs that the state will not cover. She asked a simple question. Why not fix school funding first so both students and taxpayers can breathe?

HB 1358 distracts from the urgent work Granite State voters expect lawmakers to do this session. The right sequence is simple. First, meet the state's constitutional obligation to fund an

adequate public education through our school districts in every community. Then, if there is still interest after schools have been fully funded and students, families and communities can see what that opportunity looks like, examine structural alternatives. By no means should local voice and local control be diminished in the way **HB1358** proposes where all information and discussion is lost in a sea of competing demands for attention.

For our students, our communities, and our taxpayers, I urge you to vote inexpedient to legislate on **HB 1358**.

Debrah Howes

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Debrah Howes".

President, AFT-New Hampshire