



Reaching Higher NH
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To: Chair Noble and Members of the House Education Policy and Administration Committee

My name is Alex Tilsley, and I am writing on behalf of Reaching Higher NH, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education research and policy organization. Reaching Higher NH believes that public schools are an essential public good. We work to empower New Hampshire families, educators, community members, and decisionmakers with information and analysis to advance the state's public education system.

I am writing in opposition to **SB 101**. Public school open enrollment policies can absolutely open up opportunities for some students, but the proposed policy for New Hampshire would do so at the expense of other students. Rather than allow some students to access an education outside their home zip code, we should instead ensure that every student has access to a high-quality education where they live.

Open enrollment will not close achievement gaps. By and large, New Hampshire's students perform well relative to the nation, but we know there are unacceptable gaps between our highest and lowest performing districts. Decades of research has shown that increased funding leads to improved student outcomes. Yet, open enrollment will direct more money to schools that are already producing great outcomes while limiting resources available to schools that need support. Though the small percentage of students who use open enrollment may benefit, the vast majority of New Hampshire's public school students will not.

Voters have demonstrated that they want to keep education local. This spring, most New Hampshire school districts gave voters a chance to weigh in on open enrollment through the warrant article process. Based on [data we collected at Reaching Higher NH](#), at least 99 districts voted on open enrollment this spring (54 districts did not have open enrollment warrant articles on their ballots). Of those 99 districts, at least 76 passed open enrollment policies. We have only identified 3 districts so far in which open enrollment failed to pass. While this might sound like an endorsement of open enrollment, the devil is in the details – of the policies that passed, 72 of them focus on promoting school stability by limiting movement out. And while most allow some students to enter the district, out-of-district enrollment is commonly capped somewhere between 1 and 5 students, with a few exceptions. These patterns indicate that voters, whose tax dollars make up the majority of school funding, want to keep education local.

The proposed policy lacks protections for students and districts. Reaching Higher NH did an [analysis of the 22 states](#) with statewide open enrollment policies and found that the proposed policy in New Hampshire is missing key details included in policies in almost every other state. For instance:

- Almost every other state details an appeals process for students whose open enrollment applications are rejected.

- More than half of states have a specified, common timeline for open enrollment applications and acceptances.
- More than half of states specify that once a student transfers, they can remain at that school until they reach the last grade offered. Some states guarantee a place in the district through high school graduation.
- Half of states limit how often a student can transfer.
- Some states offer transportation reimbursement for families whose children qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.
- At least one state offers “hold harmless” funding to districts who lose significant enrollment to open enrollment, to ensure all districts still have the resources they need to offer a quality education.

Open enrollment weakens the tie between schools and communities. By divorcing residence from school attendance zone, open enrollment could have unpredictable impacts on property values. If families no longer need to live in a district to attend school there, open enrollment could, over time, lower property values in high-demand districts and raise them in adjacent districts. In addition, open enrollment could, over time, make voters less willing to fund their public schools, particularly if those public schools are being attended by a significant number of out-of-district students or if it's seen as more cost effective to push students out of district through open enrollment.

Every student deserves access to a high quality education where they live. Looking at data from other states, we can estimate that between 5 and 10% of Granite State students would take advantage of open enrollment. That leaves 90 to 95% of our public school students – and public school is the choice for 90% of Granite Staters – in their home school. The first priority of this committee should be ensuring that each of those students has access to a high quality education close to home. If a school is underperforming, we should attempt to understand why and to fix the problem, rather than simply sending a life raft to take a few students to a better school. What happens to the students who don't fit on the life raft? What about the families who love their school, but who are struggling to convince their neighbors to continue paying for it?

Pathways exist in the system for students who would be better served by a different public school. Before we expand those pathways, at taxpayers' expense, we should do our best to ensure most students won't need them.

Sincerely,

Alex Tilsley
Director of Policy
Reaching Higher NH