

**Commission to Study School Funding  
RSA 193-E:2-e  
Public Engagement Workgroup Report  
Draft 11/10/2020**

**Public Engagement Overview**

New Hampshire Listens, a civic engagement initiative at the Carsey School of Public Policy designed a comprehensive public engagement strategy to inform the public about the goals and activities of the Commission that would create pathways for public input that could inform deliberations and decisions. The key engagement activities anticipated during the Commission’s work included stakeholder focus groups with municipal and school leaders, a statewide survey, student voice summit, and statewide community conversations.

***Initial Briefing with Education Stakeholders and Determining Who Needs to Provide Input***

To begin, the Carsey School and New Hampshire Listens staff supporting the Commission gathered key stakeholders in March 2020 to provide an initial briefing about the Commission and its work. The 16 attendees represented the NH School Administrators Association, NH National Education Association, Career and Technical Education Advisory Board, NH Association of Special Education Administrators, NH School Boards Association, NH Charitable Foundation, Reaching Higher NH, Governor’s Council on Diversity and Inclusion, and the NH Coalition for Business in Education. They provided their perspectives regarding:

1. What they would like the Commission to consider as it gets started
2. Their hopes for what will happen as a result of the Commission’s work
3. The concerns they hold that they want the Commission to keep in mind

Key themes from this discussion included:

- Start with the realities and basics
- Unification, sustainability and equitable solutions for students and taxpayers
- Name disparities, challenges, and definition of adequacy
- Identify funding streams and contributors
- Keep in mind politics of communication and clarity of purpose/decisions
- Make creative and thorough solutions

***Workgroup Tasks, Questions, and Engagement Activities***

Following this initial in-person gathering of stakeholders, all other public engagement efforts were shifted online. The design originally proposed for public engagement was adjusted in order to accommodate the realities people are facing during pandemic. When the Commission re-convened remotely, the public engagement workgroup was formed and began to focus on the following tasks during meetings:

- Review specific plans for stakeholder, student, and public engagement (including design, key questions, and locations),
- Identify key groups to recruit to engagement events,
- Review input from engagement activities and review summaries of that input, and
- Identify key findings from all engagement activities (What did we hear from the people involved in these activities and elsewhere? How do the findings inform final recommendations?)

Workgroup members generated a list of stakeholders who could provide input that represents multiple points of views and experiences.<sup>1</sup> The following questions prompted discussion:

1. What stakeholders do we need to engage in the focus groups? (e.g., by position, advocacy area, interest area, racial and social identity diversity)
2. What are the questions we want to ask stakeholders?
3. What data do we need to share with stakeholders, so they can provide input?

The workgroup also generated questions and commented on the design of surveys and focus groups.<sup>2</sup> The questions for the public focused on the following key areas:

- How the current funding system works from their experiences, perspective, and role(s)
- The most important factors in providing an adequate education to students across the state
- The components of an “adequate” education that should be considered as part of the base formula for calculating the cost of adequacy
- The positive outcomes for students across the state and how they should be measured
- Barriers that inhibit the opportunity to an adequate education in New Hampshire
- Understandings and perspectives about how public funding for schools is gathered and distributed (local and state distribution)

Overall from March 2020 through late October 2020, a comprehensive series of public engagement efforts occurred. Table 1 provides the timing and list of activities, and the number of participants. For

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<sup>1</sup> Find the planning document here:

[https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/05/audit\\_stakeholderparticipation\\_final05212020.pdf](https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/05/audit_stakeholderparticipation_final05212020.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Find a planning document with questions here:

[https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/08/schoolfunding\\_engagementquestionsmarch-sept\\_08262020\\_1.pdf](https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/08/schoolfunding_engagementquestionsmarch-sept_08262020_1.pdf)

those looking for more detail about the findings and participants, summary reports are posted on the Commission’s website and linked in table 1.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1. Public Engagement Timing, Efforts, Summary Links, Participant Counts**

Timing	Participants*	Effort
March 2020	16	Education stakeholder briefings <a href="https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/schoolfunding_publicengagementoverview_pointscrosswalk_draft3_10262020.pdf">https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/schoolfunding_publicengagementoverview_pointscrosswalk_draft3_10262020.pdf</a> .
September 2020	17	
June 2020	48	Municipal and school leader online focus groups (x12) <a href="https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/draft_schoolfunding_municipalschoolleaderreprise_discussionguide_10112020.pdf">https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/draft_schoolfunding_municipalschoolleaderreprise_discussionguide_10112020.pdf</a>
October 2020	15	Municipal and school leader reprise briefing and discussion <a href="https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/11/schoolfunding_municipalschoolleaders_summary_11032020.pdf">https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/11/schoolfunding_municipalschoolleaders_summary_11032020.pdf</a> .
July 2020	1,768	Educator Survey <a href="https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/11/schoolfunding_educatorsurvey_allfinal_11042020.pdf">https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/11/schoolfunding_educatorsurvey_allfinal_11042020.pdf</a>
September 2020	1,030	Granite State Poll – statewide survey (University of New Hampshire Survey Center) <a href="https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/2020_09_-_granite_state_poll_-_commission_to_study_school_funding_report.pdf">https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/2020_09_-_granite_state_poll_-_commission_to_study_school_funding_report.pdf</a>
October 2020	11	Senior resident focus groups <a href="https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/schoolfunding_seniorresident_summary_10122020.pdf">https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/schoolfunding_seniorresident_summary_10122020.pdf</a>
October 2020	8	Taxpayer association focus group <a href="https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/schoolfunding_taxpayerssummary_10122020.pdf">https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/schoolfunding_taxpayerssummary_10122020.pdf</a>
October 2020	21	Student voice public comment and focus group <a href="https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/11/schoolfunding_youthvoice_summary_11032020.pdf">https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/11/schoolfunding_youthvoice_summary_11032020.pdf</a>
July – November 2020	Need to add up	Extended public commenting sessions 11/18, 10/28, 10/14, 10/7 (youth voice), 9/30, 9/23, 9/16, 8/12, 7/15  Public comment session minutes and testimonies: <a href="https://carsey.unh.edu/school-funding/school-funding-study/resources/meeting-documents-video">https://carsey.unh.edu/school-funding/school-funding-study/resources/meeting-documents-video</a>  A Summary of Public Comments: <a href="https://carsey.unh.edu/school-funding-study/resources">https://carsey.unh.edu/school-funding-study/resources</a> .
<b>Overall Points and Themes**</b>	Add total	<a href="https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/schoolfunding_publicengagementoverview_pointscrosswalk_draft3_10262020.pdf">https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/schoolfunding_publicengagementoverview_pointscrosswalk_draft3_10262020.pdf</a> .

*\*New Hampshire Listens and Carsey School staff facilitated the discussions, and Commission members attended some of the activities to support briefing the public and answer questions. Each activity (minus the surveys) provided an overview of the Commission’s purpose and work. The taxpayer association and senior focus groups also included local municipal leaders or those seeking election who were interested in learning more.*

*\*\*This summary does not include the Granite State Poll or municipal and school leader reprise summary findings.*

<sup>3</sup> The draft designs for each effort is listed on this site under meeting documents. The documents are placed under the meeting date they were discussed – <https://carsey.unh.edu/school-funding>.

**Principle Points and Broad Findings Garnered from Engagement Activities**

Members of the engagement workgroup and Commission leadership, along with New Hampshire Listens staff drafted the following principle points after reviewing the reports and overview of findings listed in Table 1. The principles serve two purposes (1) to share the broad findings and key points that resonated across public engagement activities completed during the Commission and (2) To help inform the adequacy and distribution and the fiscal policy workgroups, and to connect policy-making recommendations with local thinking. The principles drafted are as follows:

Commented [CP1]: This is the most recent version

1. Education inequities in public school districts across the state was voiced clearly in each engagement activity. All public input recognized that the current funding system, dependent on local property taxes, does not provide an equitable opportunity for an adequate education for all students regardless of where they live.
2. The general public raised concerns about the reliance on property tax and the unequal application of taxes across the state when funding public schools. The current system of public school funding does not work in many people's minds. A change needs to be made in the current revenue system for tax payers to seek property tax relief.
3. There is a consistent concern about the reliance on local property tax to fund public schools, but there is no consensus on an alternative form of revenue.
4. Disparities in property taxes can negatively impact students achievement, particularly in high poverty areas and in communities that have higher racial and language diversity.
5. The public has varying understanding about how public schools are funded and how funds are allocated to school districts.
6. People agree that funding for public schools should be student-centered and based upon identified student needs and outcomes that will prepare students for diverse career and college pathways.
7. There is general concern about how the pandemic has affected student needs and the funding of those needs, both short- and long-term.
8. Unfunded mandates create an increased tax burden on local public school districts when the state does not provide funding for those mandates. Local educators often feel a lack of capacity to implement mandates because of the lack of funds.
9. There is concurrence that the key to a quality education is a quality teaching staff. High turnover of staff impacts continuity in the quality of education in a public school district. Teacher retention and professional development is foundational to a quality education and student performance.

***Connections to Policy-Making and Implementation***

In addition to the principles listed in the previous section, the engagement workgroup also discussed many policy-making and implementation considerations in connection with the Commission’s public engagement activity findings.

**Staff quality, capacity, and numbers matter.** When schools have quality teachers and adequate staffing, the schools can offer curricular and extracurricular opportunities, which are important to students. Students during the engagement activities noted that they love their teachers. They also want experiences in school that are beyond the basics and prepare them for future careers. This links to concerns about equity and outcomes noted by the public across the state.

**The current formula covers the current funding need.** however there will be additional cost if SWEPT is collected by the state. Additional funding will be needed to support the state Department of Education with staffing to insure accountability measures. Additional funding will also be needed. Building Aid is sorely funded, when students and parents go to other schools they notice the inequity in facilities, how do we insure all students have a healthy and safe school environment to meet all student needs that cost more than what is currently on the table?

**Accountability measures need further discussion.** In reference to the Commission’s research on developing an outcome-based model for funding schools and public engagement activities, workgroup members discussed the lack of clarity regarding accountability measures in the current funding model. Who determines outcome measures and levels of acceptable outcomes? Who monitors and supports the process? For instance, what can be learned from Title I guidance and oversight to help connecting accountability to the adequacy system?

**The culture of education and teaching is shifting.** There is an acknowledged need for equity and momentum in the state for educational improvements. Educators reminded the Commission that workforce development and diverse pathways toward careers is important. Schools are looking closely students’ needs holistically and taking on a student-centered approach (e.g., family and community

**Commented [CP2]:** This section needs careful review and clarification, it is based on the engagement workgroup discussion from 10/29 and notes shared at the 11/2 full Commission meeting.

It could also be reordered to better connect with principles sections

engagement, PACE schools/districts – competency-based teaching and learning, social-emotional and behavioral supports)

**Balance between local and state funding, grants, and partnerships aides sustainable funding across the state.** Municipal and school leaders spoke about sustainable funding in relation to certain districts’ need to rely on grants and being unable to fulfill unfunded mandates put forward by the state Department of Education or the legislature. This funding can include social and emotional supports for students, which is an identified need.

**There remains a need for further discussion about taxpayer concerns and needs.** The research from the American Institutes of Research (AIR) has also shown the cost of providing an adequate education differs among districts and communities, and the estimated cost model described may not necessarily relate to the fiscal capacity of a municipality of school district in its effort to focus on equitable students’ outcomes. When looking at a municipalities’ ability to pay, taxpayer inequities enter the conversation.

**People wonder about revenue sources.** For instance, the current revenue mechanisms may seem to satisfy the current needs but that may change -- This is a question for people. The public wonders and discusses, what might be the new taxes on the table? Is there enough revenue right now? How much is it distributed to each district to meet diverse student needs and outcomes?

**People on fixed incomes, including senior residents, may need local property tax relief.** This concern links to the work of the fiscal policy workgroup regarding circuit breakers. It links to potential policies that include a tax deferral program. In connection to public engagement, these may be very difficult to and complex to organize and manage at the municipal level. The state could help make taxpayer relief more actionable.

#### ***Need for Further Outreach and Engagement***

The public engagement workgroup, perhaps unsurprisingly, recommends that additional public outreach and education about school funding in general and the Commission’s work is needed. There are

varying levels of understanding. Outreach about the Commission’s findings and further engagement regarding school funding is warranted. The public engagement workgroup brainstormed the following list as a list of suggestions to get started.

- Legislators learning exchange for new members
- Business and Industry Association
- Chambers of Commerce
- Business and education coalition
- NH Department of Education
- Superintendents
- Business managers
- Special Education directors
- City managers – NH Municipal Association
- Local city councilors and select board
- Editorial boards
- Groups representing marginalized communities – English language learners, NH National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Welcoming NH, Economic Vitality NH
- School Funding Fairness Project
- Higher education groups
- County commissioners
- Stakeholders representing educators and school district leadership and staff – School Board Association
- Young Leaders – youth organizations and leaders NH Youth in Government
- Career and technical education – 28 CTE directors/principals
- Parent and family voices groups – NH Family Voices, NH Partners in Education
- Former coalition communities

Students, people advocating for educators, taxpayers, and/or students, local and state decision-makers, elected officials and people running for local offices, joined public commenting sessions and engagement activities eager to learn more and offer their knowledge and perspectives. And it became clear that local and state-level decision-making among elected officials needs to be bolstered by public perspectives and more comprehensive knowledge about how school funding works at multiple levels of New Hampshire’s school funding system.

Commented [CP3]: Need to review and thinking about how this section of the report may close...