

**Commission to Study School Funding
RSA 193-E:2-e**

**Public Engagement Workgroup Report
Draft 11/16/2020**

Public Engagement Overview

School funding in New Hampshire is a long-term policy challenge that many have studied and discussed for years, as the summarized history shows. Taxpayers, students, parents, educators, local and state policy-makers and decision-makers all play a role in the system. They naturally hold varying viewpoints and understanding about school funding. They want New Hampshire to be a state where people can live and find the resources they need throughout their lifespan. They are very aware that the financial resources that provide students what they need in public schools are linked primarily to local property taxes – a system that many see as flawed and a system they want to understand better, to balance community needs, tax payer concerns, and students' opportunity to adequate education statewide. This section of the report is an overview of public engagement efforts coordinated by New Hampshire Listens a civic engagement initiative at the University of New Hampshire's (UNH) Carsey School of Public Policy. These qualitative findings provided the Commission with a sense of the public's knowledge, beliefs, and values regarding school funding in the state. It offers...

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New Hampshire public school funding has been and continues to be a long term policy challenge. Many have studied and discussed this for years, as the historical summary indicates. Taxpayers, students, parents educators, local and state policy-makers all play a role in the system. People who provided their thinking during the public engagement activities want New Hampshire to be a state where people can live within their means, find the resources they need, and have a public school system that prepares students for their futures. They are very aware that the financial resources that support public schools are primarily raised in local property taxes. They see the current funding system as flawed overall. It is also a system that many believe the public and decision-makers need better understanding about. The public further voiced the need to balance community needs, tax payer concerns, and for all students' to have an

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opportunity to an adequate education – the major concern, when stated briefly, are issues of equity for both students and taxpayers. This section of the report is an overview of public engagement efforts coordinated by New Hampshire Listens, a civic engagement initiative at the University of New Hampshire's (UNH) Carsey School of Public Policy. These qualitative findings provided the commission members with a sense of the public's knowledge, beliefs, and values regarding public school funding in the state. The findings offer an opportunity to discuss a funding formula based on student outcomes, a formula that can offer an opportunity for academic achievement at the state average of assessment. The findings further recommend a funding formula that is less dependent on local property taxes.

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

New Hampshire Listens 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 originally 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.

To begin this work, 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 workgroup 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 also generated a list of stakeholders who could provide input that would represent multiple points of views and experiences.¹ 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.² The questions for the public engagement activities 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)

¹ Find the planning document here:

https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/05/audit_stakeholderparticipation_final05212020.pdf.

² Find a planning document with questions here:

https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/08/schoolfunding_engagementquestionsmarch-sept_08262020_1.pdf

The workgroup met 16 times. Agendas, meeting materials, and minutes are available on the Commission website under each calendar date listed here: <https://carsey.unh.edu/school-funding/calendar>.³

- May 7, 2020
- May 18, 2020
- May 21, 2020
- June 1, 2020
- June 5, 2020
- June 15, 2020
- July 16, 2020
- August 3, 2020
- August 7, 2020
- August 17, 2020
- August 31, 2020
- September 14, 2020
- September 29, 2020
- October 13, 2020
- October 22, 2020
- October 29, 2020

From March 2020 through late October 2020 a comprehensive series of efforts occurred including two statewide surveys (Granite State Poll – random sample representative of the state and educator survey) and 16 focus groups (school and municipal leaders, youth, senior residents, tax payer associations). Table 1 provides the timing, number of participants, and description of each activity. The table also includes links to each summary document posted on the Commission website. These summaries provide additional details about participants and findings.⁴

Table 1. Public Engagement Timing, Participation Counts, Efforts, and Summary Links

Timing	Count*	Effort
March 2020	16	Education stakeholder briefings https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/schoolfunding_publicengagementoverview_pointscrosswalk_draft3_10262020.pdf
September 2020	17	Municipal and school leader online focus groups (x12) https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/draft_schoolfunding_municipalschoolleaderreprise_discussionguide_10112020.pdf
June 2020	48	Municipal and school leader reprise briefing and discussion https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/11/schoolfunding_municipalschoolleaders_summary_11032020.pdf
October 2020	15	School and District Employee (Educator) Survey https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/11/schoolfunding_educatorsurvey_allfinal_11042020.pdf
July 2020	1,768	Granite State Poll – statewide survey (UNH Survey Center) https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/2020_09_-_granite_state_poll_-_commission_to_study_school_funding_report.pdf
September 2020	1,030	
October 2020	11	Senior resident focus groups (10/2, AM & PM)

³ Past October 29th, engagement discussions were integrated with fiscal policy and adequacy discussions and were addressed during full Commission meetings

⁴ 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>.

		https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/schoolfunding_seniorresident_summary_10122020.pdf
October 2020	8	Taxpayer association focus group (10/1) https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/schoolfunding_taxpayersummary_10122020.pdf
October 2020	21	Student voice public comment (9/23, 10/7) and focus group (10/14) https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/11/schoolfunding_youthvoice_summary_11032020.pdf
July–November 2020	~100	Extended public commenting sessions (x8) Public comment session minutes and testimonies: https://carsey.unh.edu/school-funding/school-funding-study/resources/meeting-documents-video . Dates to find minutes: 7/15, 8/12, 9/16, 9/30, 10/7, 10/14, 10/28, 11/18 A Summary of Public Comments: https://carsey.unh.edu/school-funding/resources
Overall Points and Themes Document for Discussion**		https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/schoolfunding_publicengagementoverview_pointscrosswalk_draft3_10262020.pdf

**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. In the case of public comment counts, many stakeholders provided comments multiple times. This is a rough count of comments during meetings, extended commenting sessions, via email, the feedback form on the website,*

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

Need for Further Educational Outreach and Opportunity for Public Engagement

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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 throughout the state, which is also unsurprising. Many of the participants in public engagement focus groups noted they attended because they either had substantial experience with school funding in the past and/or they wanted to learn more about the study and current system. Outreach regarding the Commission's findings and further engagement about public school funding in New Hampshire is warranted. The public engagement workgroup brainstormed the following list of stakeholders to start.

- Legislators learning exchange for new members
- Business and Industry Association
- Chambers of Commerce
- Business and education coalition
- Groups representing marginalized communities – English language learners, NH National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Welcoming NH, Economic Vitality NH

- NH Department of Education
- Superintendents
- Business managers
- Special Education directors
- City managers – NH Municipal Association
- Local city councilors and select board
- Editorial boards
- Higher education groups
- Career and technical education – 28 CTE directors/principals
- Young Leaders – youth organizations and leaders NH Youth in Government
- Parent and family voices groups – NH Family Voices, NH Partners in Education
- Former coalition communities.
- School Funding Fairness Project
- County commissioners
- Stakeholders representing educators and school district leadership and staff – School Board Association

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.

Key Findings from Engagement Activities

Members of the engagement workgroup and Commission leadership, along with New Hampshire Listens staff drafted the following list of key findings after reviewing the engagement summary reports and overview of themes and points linked in Table 1. This list serves three purposes (1) to share key points and findings that resonated across public engagement activities completed during the Commission and (2) To help inform the adequacy and distribution and the fiscal policy workgroups reports, and (3) to connect policy-making recommendations with local thinking. The findings drafted by the engagement workgroup are as follows:

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.

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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 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. During the engagement activities students 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 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 at students’ needs and taking on a student-centered approach (e.g., family and community 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 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 and complex to organize and manage at the municipal level. The state could help make taxpayer relief more actionable.

The public engagement efforts and findings of the Commission come together with the findings gathered among the other workgroups and full Commission. As noted in the opening sections of this report, there were a number of professionals from the state system who provided presentations and reports. The Commission also hired the American Institutes of Research which provided briefs that support the public understanding of school funding in general, comparisons to other states, and a substantial report (<https://carsey.unh.edu/school-funding/resources>) which offers a shift in how New Hampshire views school funding.

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