

# Youth Voices Focus Group and Public Comment

## Summary for the Commission to Study School Funding



Facilitated and compiled by New Hampshire Listens and Carsey School of Public Policy staff for the Commission to Study School Funding to promote further discussion and understanding of community voices. Report Date: November 3, 2020, Available under November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020 <https://carsey.unh.edu/school-funding/school-funding-study/resources/meeting-documents-video>. Learn more about NH Listens at [www.nhlistens.org](http://www.nhlistens.org).

This report summarizes findings from one online small group discussion and one public commenting session focused on youth perspectives (ages ranging from ~14-25). The public commenting session occurred on October 7th and a small group conversation occurred on October 13, 2020. The purpose of this summary is to provide a sense of values, beliefs, and concerns about school funding in New Hampshire from young people's perspectives to help the Commission to Study School Funding gain further insight into local realities and thinking.

### Participants Roles in their Communities and at Home

- Public Comments:
  - 16 students from Manchester West High School accessing English Language services
  - 1 recent Exeter graduate
- Focus Group:
  - 2 students from Portsmouth High School
  - 1 student from Franklin Pierce College
  - 1 student from the University of New Hampshire (who is a former student school board member at Berlin High School)
  - *A member of the NH Listens team and the Commission Engagement Workgroup attended to facilitate and support discussion*

### Summary Themes and Example Points from Comments and Discussion

#### Public Comments

During the Youth Voice Public Comment discussion, students participating clearly outlined their needs regarding education, and what the current school system is lacking. They made sure to explain why it is necessary for certain needs to be met, mostly to prepare every student for college or career readiness. First, the students highlighted the importance of meeting the basic needs of education. Some students are lacking enough chairs in their classrooms, up-to-date textbooks, or safe facilities – requirements they see as the bare minimum for an education. Students also put an emphasis on technology and resources for English language learning students – two main areas of need in many property-poor schools. In terms of technology, access to computers and basic technology skill-building is expected at the college level and entry-level employment. In the classrooms, students also noted that the lack of funding for ELL students limits access to translators, books in different languages, and food options based on cultural needs, all of which place these students at a disadvantage in their learning and social experience. The students requested that teachers be trained in a more holistic way, being equipped to respond to different situations and teach diverse groups of students. This includes support for mental and emotional health and celebrating different identities through representative curriculum.

## Focus Group

More so in the focus group, the students noted that the requirement of providing an adequate education is not realistic for college or career readiness. When students have opportunities and choices for different classes, sports, extracurriculars, and learning experiences beyond the classroom, they are able to explore different interests and passions. Not only does this access to opportunity allow students to explore different paths beyond high school graduation, but also allows them to build the potential skills needed to apply for scholarships. With this, students will feel confident that they have the skills to succeed in their next step, as well as compete and collaborate with their peers.

In evaluating the outcomes of students' education, one student summed it up by saying,

*"Since our lifestyles are changing, education is constantly changing. Therefore, the definition of adequate education should change to further reflect that."*

Students in New Hampshire want to have the same opportunities, choices, resources, and experiences as their peers in order to feel ready for whichever next step they take beyond high school. They want to feel ready and knowledgeable about the world around them so that they can engage with and contribute to it. Where municipal funding isn't enough, students believe that the state should fill in the gaps in order to even out the playing field. The money given to schools should be conditional on each school's needs, first we need to meet the basic needs, then fund equitable opportunities for all New Hampshire students.

## Appendix

*NOTE: The numbers and assertions in these statements may be arguable. They are notes taken during the focus groups and comments recorded in writing to help the Commission inform their decisions as well as hear and understand local perspectives. Overall, these notes and findings serve as a means to help enhance discussion during the process of studying school funding.*

### Focus Group

#### **Background Provided along with a short 5 minute Video on School Funding**

##### **Overview of the Commission and Public Engagement**

The New Hampshire Commission to Study School Funding is focused on developing school funding policies that are more fair. This group needs to make sure the system of funding education is legal and constitutional. The Commission partnered with the University of New Hampshire Carsey School of Public Policy and its public engagement program New Hampshire Listens to hear from local stakeholders, like you, the students who attend or attended public schools in New Hampshire. Your voice matters in this process, and today provides the Commission a chance to hear what you are thinking. For the next hour or so, you will participate in a small group discussion. You will not be recorded, but your thoughts will be noted by our facilitators and notetakers.

##### **School Funding in NH: A Quick Overview<sup>1</sup>**

The New Hampshire constitution states that every student has the right to the opportunity for an adequate education paid for by the state. NH minimum standards for adequate schools include the combined cost of teachers, instructional materials, operations, a school counselor, a principal, and technology, to name just a few. In 2020, each district received \$3,708 per student. Also, districts received additional funds called “differentiated aid.” This amount is based on the number of students who may need special education services, receive English Language Learning services, and/or qualify for free or reduced lunch.

New Hampshire schools operate on local property tax, state-wide property tax, and federal funding. Much of every school’s budget comes from people and businesses that pay taxes on the value of their property. Some districts and towns have more property wealth than others. This can be from living in communities with large bodies of water like the Atlantic Ocean or Lake Winnepesaukee. Or it can be because there is a lot of industry or businesses. Public school districts in New Hampshire with more property wealth can spend a lot more on schools over the state’s minimum standards (base adequacy). Some districts spend less than \$15,000 per student, and some spend over \$25,000. This can mean students in public schools across New Hampshire have different access to technology, materials for learning like textbooks, extracurriculars like sports and band, classes like foreign languages or advanced placement options.

At the beginning of 2020 a Commission to Study School Funding was created with legislators and community members to help make school funding in New Hampshire more equitable, meaning fair for all students across the state. That is why we are here to discuss what you think about school funding in New Hampshire.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Reaching Higher NH’s forthcoming video on school funding in New Hampshire.

### **Questions Framing the Discussion**

The meeting was held online via Zoom. The participants received the focus group questions prior to the meeting and the questions were placed in the chat log. Not all questions were specifically posed during the discussion, but each was addressed during the focus as conversation unfolded.

- What do you think about the difference in funding amongst schools in our state?
- What would you consider an adequate education?
- What barriers exist for students and their families based on how schools are funded?
- Who should pay for our public schools?
- Students take tests and make decisions about life after high-school that help decision-makers measure how well students are doing in school. What should school leaders measure to know whether students have received a (Good? Fair? Similar? Equal?) education no matter what community they live in?
- How would you describe a student who has had a positive outcome in NH public schools?

### **Focus Group Notes**

- Meeting: Two students from Portsmouth High School, One student from Franklin Pierce College, One student from the University of New Hampshire (who is a former student school board member at Berlin High School), and a member of the board for Educational Funding
- What comes to mind when you think about what is important for education
  - Materials, better opportunities, extra curriculars and technology (emphasis technology)
  - Technology: Why is it important?
    - College: need laptop to function (classes and notes)
    - Need to know basic functions of programming
    - Computers are a great research tool (makes things a lot easier) and up to date
    - Find videos to help explain a topic
- One thing that needs more funding?
  - Training for how to react in certain situations (teachers taught some students differently than others, sexual harassment incidents) (How to treat students properly)
    - Help relay content to students in multiple ways
    - Big concern about making sure that all students is being thought of (no prejudice, mental health is considered, and curriculum represents many people)
  - Technology and the importance of one on one technology
  - Money to sponsor students on trips and for other opportunities
- What do you think about the difference in funding amongst schools in our state?
  - Disturbing: having attended a low-income school district, and student taught at a more-wealthy school, there is a difference
  - Traveling for sports: huge difference in fields and tennis courts (Portsmouth has nice facilities and what they need, but it is easy to see that other schools don't have the same opportunities)
  - Schools with old textbooks (didn't notice the issue at first) but the information was old, and there were cracks on tennis courts, etc.
- Concord schools do not have enough funding for English Language Learners: Why is that? They receive the least amount of money
  - Question for the Commission

- What would you consider an adequate education?
  - An adequate education: defined by the state as basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills. Schools need to follow standards for approval (guidance counselors per student, etc.)
    - Schools now are not able to maintain the minimum standards for an adequate education (minimum is not average)
    - Does not require Advanced Placement classes, technical courses, etc.
    - Trying to now get students both college and career ready
  - Students have access to updated class materials so that they are properly prepared for college, and a program to help students transition to college
  - Provide students with the skills to enter the workforce
  - Skills for lifelong learning, technological skills, interpersonal skills, reading, writing, math, civics and government, arts and literature, etc.
- What barriers exist for students and their families based on how schools are funded?
  - Access to resources that allow them to excel in academics and extra-curriculars (don't help them pursue higher education or a job)
  - Opportunities that are limited might stop a student from getting a scholarship for college
  - Lack of Advanced Placement courses at schools with less funding (less opportunities)
- Who should pay for our public schools?
- Students take tests and make decisions about life after high-school that help decision-makers measure how well students are doing in school. What should school leaders measure to know whether students have received a (Good? Fair? Similar? Equal?) education no matter what community they live in?
  - Focus on outcomes of students who pursue higher education (they should be accepted into the same schools as students in wealthier communities)
  - Look at grades: if a student is doing poorly, it is a sign the school is not doing their job.
  - Look at SAT scores to see the average schools
  - Combine different methods to account for errors
- How would you use factors to decide how money is distributed across the state?
  - If a town has low funding, the state funding should be higher for each student, so that the rate is more competitive to schools with higher income taxes
  - Funding should be allocated to the districts, but also from property taxes from the state. The state gets tax money and then gives it to the schools, in addition to their own money.
  - There should be more funding to having a psychologist for high schools to help students with stress, which can hurt their grades and performance.
  - Allocating money by the state for each topic: for example, an amount will go toward just new materials. Schools wouldn't necessarily get to choose where the money goes
- *How would you describe a student who has had a positive outcome in NH public schools?*
  - Student is "confident" and graduates prepared and excited for the next step (higher education or career) (They are motivated than unsure)
  - Student should be doing well in classes and should be have an idea and plan for the next step and a way to follow through
  - Emphasis for a plan for the future

- The student has the skills to succeed at the next step (graduate college or keep a job)
- Definition of adequate: since our lifestyles are changing, education is constantly changing. Therefore, the definition of adequate education should change to further reflect that.

## **Summary of Public Comments**

### ***Themes from Student Voice Commenting Session on October 7th***

- Enough school resources for all students to have the opportunity to thrive and find passion
  - Funding for opportunities and helping students take part in them
  - More after school activities; sports programs
  - Cultural activities, especially at schools where students have a lot to learn about each other
- Concern for better internet, sports, textbooks, language opportunities, and food
  - Amount of languages and dialects spoken at Manchester does not match the translator and language resources of the school
  - Availability of books in different languages
- Students at all schools deserve to have the same access to resources and funding the school needs for those resources
- Students' options for food:
  - Take into account cultural and religious backgrounds, dietary restriction
  - More food and drink choices
- Collaborative programs in schools with businesses and colleges
- More teachers for a wider range of subjects and class options
- Access to enough guidance counselors/emotional support for students
- Enough transportation to get students to school
- School supplies – students don't even have enough chairs in their classrooms; not enough computers for students to use

MAIN CONCERNS ACROSS THE BOARD: cultural and language barriers; food; better internet; textbooks and other classroom supplies; access to choices for classes and extracurriculars

### ***Links to Public Comment Notes, Student Statements, and Public Comment Recording***

- Public Comment Notes 09/23: [https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/09/schoolfunding\\_youthvoicecomments\\_09232020.pdf](https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/09/schoolfunding_youthvoicecomments_09232020.pdf)
- Public Comment Video 09/23: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfVY8-VmsZg&feature=youtu.be>
- Public Comment Notes 10/7: [https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/youth\\_voice\\_public\\_comment\\_10-07-20.pdf](https://carsey.unh.edu/sites/default/files/media/2020/10/youth_voice_public_comment_10-07-20.pdf)
- Public Comment Video 10/7: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xVyTLPxBUU&feature=youtu.be>
- Statements from Students 10/7: <https://carsey.unh.edu/school-funding-study/resources>