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Patrick Hynes: COVID exposes need for education freedom accounts

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BEDFORD HIGH SCHOOL has issued twice the number of failing grades this year compared with last year.

In Nashua, more than 1,000 parents have joined Nashua Parent Voice and are prepared to recall school board members who, operating in the interest of the teachers union, refuse to reintroduce in-person learning.

According to data from the Manchester School District, 42% of kids are failing at least one class. Thirty percent have five or more absences.

To compound matters, the data show minority kids are struggling disproportionately.

New Hampshire students are in crisis.

Rep. Glenn Cordelli (R-Tuftsboro) has a bill to address this crisis. Well, truth be told, the idea was originally the brainchild of former House Speaker Dick Hinch. That's why Cordelli's proposed legislation, HB20, reads, "Establishing

the Richard 'Dick' Hinch Education Freedom Account Program.”

Cordelli describes education freedom accounts as “a form of savings accounts like health savings accounts. Money from the state that would go to educate your child, which currently goes to the school district, would be placed into an account for the parents to find the best education options for their children.

“Remote learning during this pandemic has opened a window for parents into their child’s education, about the education that is being provided to them, the good and the bad,” Cordelli says. “And they’ve also learned a lot about how their child actually learns. Remote learning isn’t for everyone. Some things about it are great, some not so great. But it’s causing a whole lot of problems.”

New Hampshire families are hardly alone in their education struggles during the pandemic. “This whole remote learning process is speeding up the move to providing more options for families across the country,” Cordelli says.

Under Cordelli’s proposal, any child who is eligible to attend a public school in New Hampshire will be eligible to secure one of these accounts, which will be administered by an existing organization that oversees the state’s education tax credit program enacted in 2012. Cordelli’s legislation also proposes new layers of legislative oversight and a parent advisory council to guide the program.

The accounts can be used for a broad catalogue of educational programs including tuition, tutors, therapy, and more. Cordelli says the legislation was

built to provide “a whole range of options, with the goal being that every child deserves the best education possible.”

The program will not touch local taxpayer dollars that fund schools and uses no federal dollars. Instead it will “use money taxpayers have provided to the state and return it to parents to fund their kids’ education as they see fit,” says Cordelli.

But won’t some of this money be used to fund religious schools? Well, the measure isn’t designed to do that. It’s up to parents how they would use the resources. Regardless, in its decision in *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*, the United States Supreme Court ruled that the Free Exercise Clause of the U.S. Constitution prohibits state-based scholarship programs from discriminating against religious schools.

In its fiscal analysis of Cordelli’s measure published last week, the state Department of Education projects, “New Hampshire taxpayers would save \$360 million to \$390 million over the next decade.”

Cordelli’s legislation offers immeasurable benefits to Granite Staters. Bullied or struggling kids can seek out new learning environments where they can thrive. A better-educated public will reduce the pressure on social programs in the future. A well-educated workforce will keep the New Hampshire economy the jewel of the northeast. And greater options for families will introduce more competition in the education space inspiring all schools, public and private, to strive for excellence.

New Hampshire families know all this. That's probably why an EdChoice poll conducted last year shows 71% support the idea of education freedom accounts.

Education is essential to our society. For the significant majority of Granite Staters, public schools are a perfect fit for their education needs. But for some – indeed, a growing number – the current ZIP code-driven model isn't working. Or isn't enough. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown this into sharp relief. Education freedom accounts represent an exciting and fresh approach to education in New Hampshire.

Parents and taxpayers can help education freedom accounts along by contacting their legislators through **educationfreedomnh.org** and encouraging them to support HB20.

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