

Funding the dismantling of N.H. education with our property taxes?

Friday, February 24, 2012

Have you ever heard of The Alliance for the Separation of School and State, where you sign a proclamation that says, "I proclaim publicly that I favor ending government involvement in education?" The Alliance, along with the Cato Institute and a panoply of think tanks with cooked data, have brought us the proposed school voucher program over which our very own Legislature is laboring as we speak.

We hear school vouchers sold as school choice for poor kids, but the goal of the national movement that has landed in New Hampshire is to dismantle American public education. The quote from the movement's godfather Milton Friedman in "Public Schools: Make Them Private" says it best: "Vouchers are not an end in themselves; they are a means to make a transition from a government to a free-market system." This is essentially the mission statement of the Cato Institute education folks who have been helping our legislators write and lobby for a school voucher program in New Hampshire.

The proposed New Hampshire program would start large and, over time, could shift as much as \$200 million in public school funding to private, religious and home schools. Here's how.

Our local property taxes fund our local public schools. That's the way it works. If we have no children, are older and kids are gone, or we send our children to a private school, we pay the school portion of our property taxes anyway.

And they're accountable to us. Even people without children in the school serve on the school board because it's a community asset to be nurtured. If it's a school whose students do well on tests and go off to college, we take pride in it. People want to live in our town. If not, we work on making it better. That's how we built our country, our democracy, our economy.

But the new program would fund school vouchers with business tax credits and, as the students left the schools, the state would take the adequacy aid back from the school districts. Our local schools would either shrink or our local property taxes would increase to replace the lost state money.

Our schools are already laboring under the burden of decreasing enrollments. Over the

past 10 years, our public schools have shrunk by 1,400 students each year as a result of demographic shifts. In its very first year, the proposed voucher program could more than double that loss — to 3,400. And the sponsors have provided for relentless annual expansion. The program could fund as many as 20,000 students in its 10th year. And all this time, public schools are shrinking and local property taxes are going up, in effect to fund the private, religious and home schools.

The schools themselves could be a local religious school or Phillips Exeter. But they would not be accountable for the results they got with our tax money. No testing. No reporting of any kind on academic results. No financial reporting. Remember, the goal here is to take the government money, but not the government control.

And the vouchers would go to many of the students who leave each year anyway to go to private and home schools. Many voucher recipients will never have been in public schools. This is clearly not a case of poor people in need. The big winners are the small Christian schools, who have had much greater enrollment losses over that past 10 years than the public schools have. A student coming with a voucher needs that much less scholarship money.

It's hard to see any legitimate public purpose in promoting this kind of outcome in New Hampshire.

Who's asking for this program anyway? The recent UNH Granite State Poll found that, by a margin of 2-1, New Hampshire voters — left, right and center — reject spending public money to send children to private schools. And public school parents are satisfied with the schools by a margin of 68% to 30%.

So our Legislature is not responding to some grass roots movement coming from within New Hampshire. It's the Alliance for the Separation of School and State, in California, and the Cato Institute in Washington DC that want this for us.

We shouldn't be fooled by the gauzy "school choice for poor people" sales pitch. We need to defend our public schools.

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Editor's note: Duncan adds that he represents Defending New Hampshire Public Schools, www.dnhpe.org.