



What K-12 scholarships would mean for N.H.

By Andrew J. Coulson
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The state Legislature is considering House Bill 1607, which would cut taxes on businesses that help families pay independent school tuition. One way to gauge the merits of this idea is to look to Florida, which enacted a similar program a decade ago.

An official analysis by the Florida legislature's accountability agency found that its education tax credits saved taxpayers \$1.49 for every dollar they reduced revenues. The reason: On average, private schools spend thousands less per pupil than public schools. And in New Hampshire, public schools spend about \$15,000 per student -- far more than in Florida.

Helping children to learn more while lowering per-student costs is certainly appealing, but aren't state-run public schools essential to building stable, cohesive communities?

As it happens, scholars have studied this question for years, and their findings were collected and summarized in 2007 by University of Arkansas professor Patrick Wolf. He found that students in freely chosen (usually private) schools are more tolerant and civic-minded than those in state-run public schools. Just last November, a randomized experimental study by Harvard professor David J. Deming concluded that students able to choose their own school committed significantly fewer crimes than those assigned to a district school.

School choice, it turns out, does a better job of advancing the ideals of public education than does a one-size-fits-all, district-based system.

Another key concern -- the program's constitutionality -- was settled last spring by the U.S. Supreme Court. The court ruled that donations to charities are private funds, whether or not they qualify for a tax credit or deduction. No parent or taxpayer is compelled to participate in such a program, and not a single dollar of public funds is spent. It is entirely voluntary, and freedom of conscience for all is preserved.

The one remaining argument against it is that perhaps New Hampshire's educational performance is already so good that it needs no improving. Certainly it's true that New Hampshire scores above average on the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests at the elementary and secondary levels. And its college-bound students score above the national average on the SAT.

But are these scores due to the state's school system or to its demographic makeup? By comparing the average performance of white students in New Hampshire to that of white students in the nation as a whole, we find that New Hampshire is only average in math and slightly below average in reading on the 12th grade NAEP test. We also find that the state is below average in both reading and math on the SAT, though much of that deficit is probably accounted for by the state's higher SAT participation rate.

With the education tax credit bill, New Hampshire has the opportunity to expand parental choice, and thereby to improve student achievement, boost civic-mindedness, reduce crime, and lower per-pupil costs. Why not learn free as well as live free?

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