

Our Turn: School choice matters, so drop Croydon lawsuit

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New Hampshire parents want the best for their children, and that includes a great K-12 education.

The state's public schools provide a conducive learning environment for most of its children, but for some children, the local school does not meet educational needs. They are at increased risk of falling behind or, worse, not graduating high school.

For these children, an alternative learning environment is necessary. For some with special needs, this means taxpayer-funded placement in a private school designed to provide an appropriate learning environment structured to best meet the child's physical and educational needs. For others, a nearby chartered public school provides the learning environment best suited for the child. And for some, school districts wanting the best for their children have contracted with private schools. Coe-Brown and Pinkerton Academy are examples where public funds pay tuition for students attending these schools.

Our own former governor John Lynch actively encouraged expanding alternative education programs during his eight years as governor. In his April 10, 2009, letter to the people of New Hampshire, Lynch said: "Since becoming governor of New Hampshire, I have made it a top priority to help every young person graduate from high school, including working to pass legislation to increase the compulsory attendance age and expanding alternative education programs for at-risk students."

His concern to reduce the state's drop-out rate led to changes in the state's Department of Education and legislative initiatives providing alternative K-12 educational opportunities for children.

School choice: It's not a partisan issue. Democrat and Republican legislators have long recognized that for New Hampshire to maintain its high standard of living, and provide the best environment in which to raise a family, a great education for all children is paramount. That's why education laws are specifically designed as a state-local partnership – where there's a shared responsibility between state and local government to provide a K-12 education for children.

RSA 193-E:1, II states: "In this system, the state establishes, through school approval and student proficiency standards and curriculum guidelines, the framework for the delivery of educational services at the local level. School districts then have flexibility in implementing diverse educational approaches tailored to meet student needs."

State law limits authority of the state government to educational standards and guidelines while authorizing local school districts (parents, teachers and school administrators) tremendous flexibility in providing diverse educational opportunities that best meet the individual needs of their children. That flexibility includes the legal authority for school districts to contract with private schools to educate their children. Indeed, RSA 194:22 clearly states, “Any school district may make a contract with an academy, high school or other literary institution located in this or, when distance or transportation facilities make it necessary, in another state, and raise and appropriate money to carry the contract into effect.”

The Croydon School District recently determined that a few of its children were at-risk. These children were struggling in the traditional public school setting. School board officials, parents, teachers, school administrators and taxpayers came together in the best interest of these children and offered alternative educational opportunities for these students. The district used its legal authority to contract with a few nearby private schools.

The district pays tuition for these students (which is about half the cost per student of the traditional public school). By all accounts, these children are now thriving in their alternative education setting.

Then why, Gov. Hassan, Attorney General Foster and Commissioner of Education Barry, are you interfering with the Croydon School District’s lawful practice to provide its children with educational opportunities that best meet each child’s needs? Why are you taking the Croydon School District to court and suing the good people of Croydon, who just want to exercise their legal right to provide the best educational opportunities for their children? Croydon is not a large school district with a large tax base and financial resources to mount a prolonged defense against state resources.

If you use the power of the state to override the will and wisdom of the people of Croydon to end school choice there, you threaten every district and child in the state. Each child in New Hampshire could suffer lifelong consequences of being forced into an educational environment that fails to meet their needs. Therefore, we urge Gov. Hassan, Attorney General Foster, and Commissioner Barry to support the good people of Croydon. End the lawsuit. Not only for the future of these children, but also the future of New Hampshire.

(Rep. Greg Hill lives in Northfield. Rep. JR Hoell lives in Dunbarton. Former representative Michael Balboni lives in Nashua.)