

Of school legislation and outcomes

- By Brendan Minnihan, Superintendent, Laconia School District
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In a couple of days, the students will be back. Hopefully, they will be well rested, well fed, and full of tales of experiences great and small that took place over their summer which can enhance their learning throughout the year to come.

The summer months also mark a time when much of the work in Concord at the state House and Senate chambers ceases until a new legislature is elected in November. For now, only a few study committees and commissions continue their work. This lull in the action, as it were, provides a nice opportunity to review the work of the legislative body and to assess whether the members are meeting the needs of our youngest constituents.

The Legislature passes or chooses not to pass legislation on a wide array of educational topics, but for the purpose of this column, I want to focus on three key areas: curriculum, instruction and assessment; privacy and safety; and funding.

Curriculum, instruction, and assessment represent three of the core principles on which education rests. Curriculum is what we teach, instruction is how we teach it, and assessment is the method of determining whether what was taught has been learned. So, legislation affecting any one of these areas has an impact on the daily life in schools. The following three pieces of legislation are the most important of the pieces passed.

Through RSA 193-I, the Legislature has required the New Hampshire Department of Education to establish and implement a supplemental high school mathematics program, consisting of two courses for those students who need extra help and assistance.

RSA 193-C:6 and RSA 91-A:5 were amended to allow families to exempt their child or children from participating in the statewide testing program. School districts are required to work with families to provide those students who do not take the statewide assessment with another mutually agreed upon activity. It is interesting to note that if schools do not have 95 percent or greater participation, they are found to not be in compliance with both state and federal expectations.

Finally, HB 1499 requires that kindergarten instruction be play-based and include movement, expression, exploration, socialization and music.

Privacy and Safety issues have garnered more attention over the past several years due to acts of extreme violence which have happened in schools. In addition, identity theft, hacking and other attempts to invade people's privacy have become more prevalent. Perhaps as a result, the Legislature passed two rather major laws in these areas.

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First, RSA 189:66, IV requires each district to develop a data security plan. This plan must be presented to the School Board annually for approval. The plan must include an inventory and related applicable pieces of information for all software applications, digital tools and extensions. These applications must be checked to ensure they meet or exceed the standards set out by the Department of Education. In addition, a response plan for any breach of information must be created.

Other legislation also requires each school to provide the Department of Education with their Emergency Management Plan which the Department of Education will share with Homeland Security.

Funding – Ah, what would New Hampshire be without questions and legislation relative to educational funding?

In the area of school funding, it is important to examine both what passed the Legislature as well as what did not pass. For example, two years ago, stabilization aid to schools was reduced. Before the reduction, Laconia received over 1 million dollars yearly in stabilization aid. The plan was to reduce this aid by 4 percent per year for the next 25 years. This past year, HB 525, which would have restored stabilization aid to the previous level, did not pass. So, the amount of stabilization aid will continue to be reduced by 4 percent each year for the next 23 years until it is eliminated entirely. As well, HB 1686 allows individuals to deduct from their taxes due, the amount of money donated to an educational scholarship fund in the form of an education tax credit. Because of past legislation, businesses were also given this deduction. Finally, a commission has been established to examine the cost and funding for providing an adequate education. The commission held their first meeting on Aug. 13 and will be reporting out their findings in the fall.

I hope this overview of legislation and how it might impact the schools and taxpayers in Laconia and around the region has been helpful. If you have thoughts and/or questions, please feel free to email me at bminnihan@laconiaschools.org.