

NH last of states in school funding

EDUCATION

Meanwhile, neighboring state Vermont tops list in national teachers' union report

By EILEEN O'GRADY

Monitor staff

New Hampshire ranks among the best in the nation when it comes to low student-to-teacher ratio, a new national education report shows, but is dead last among all states when it comes to state funding for public education.

The National Education Association, the national labor union representing teachers, released its 2021 Rankings and Estimates report, which includes state-by-state data on education issues from the 2019-20 school year, and estimates about the 2020-21 school year.

New Hampshire has the lowest contribution of

state money and the highest contribution of local money going to fund public education of all

SEE EDUCATION REPORT A2

NH has above average student-to-teacher ratio

EDUCATION REPORT FROM A1

50 states, according to the report. In the 2019-2020 school year, 31.4% of New Hampshire's education funding came from the state level, while 63.7% came from local taxpayers and 4.8% from the federal government. The national average is 47.1% for state contributions and 45.6% for local contributions.

Only Washington D.C. – a district with no state government – had lower state contribution than New Hampshire.

"This report underscores what last year's commission on school funding found: that our current school funding formula remains inequitable," said Brian Hawkins, director of government relations at NEA-NH. "When the state provides such little aid to communities, it makes it far more difficult for those districts with lower-than-average property values to raise the necessary funds to provide an adequate education for our kids."

By contrast, neighboring Vermont ranked first in the nation for state money going to public education – 89.9% of Vermont's public education funding comes from the state, while 3.7% comes from the local level and 6.4% from the federal government.

The school funding formula has been a decadeslong debate in New Hampshire, and the subject of extensive scrutiny by the Commission to Study School Funding, established by the Legislature in 2019. A report released by the commission in 2020 shows the current funding system creates inequity, as the "property rich" towns with wealthy local tax bases and high property values can generously fund their public schools, while the "property poor" towns without a deep tax base struggle to provide even basic funding.

In the ongoing "ConVal lawsuit" the Contoocook Valley School District and three others are challenging the state on this issue, saying the current funding amount isn't enough for an "adequate education," – something the state is required to provide. The ConVal district announced this month that four more school districts – Hillsboro-Deering, Claremont, Newport and Fall Mountain – will be signing on as co-plaintiffs.

"For nearly 30 years the State of New Hampshire has ignored the spirit of the original Claremont funding decision. As a result it has shifted its responsibility to local communities, creating funding inequities across the state," ConVal superintendent Kimberly Rizzo Saunders said last week. "We welcome the Fall Mountain, Claremont, Newport and Hillsboro-Deering School Districts, and encourage other districts to join us in ensuring the state meets its constitutional responsibility to the children of New Hampshire."

Teacher-to-student ratio better than average

The NEA report ranked New Hampshire as secondbest in the country for student-to-teacher ratios – with an average of 10.6 students per teacher in the 2019-2020 school year. New Hampshire

ranks behind only Vermont in this category, a state with 10.4 students per teacher in 20192020.

The report estimates New Hampshire's student-teacher ratio dropped even more to 10.1 in 2020-2021 school year, due to a decline in student enrollment.

New Hampshire's public school enrollment decline is worse than the national average. Enrollment at New Hampshire public schools dropped 4.71% from fall 2019 to fall 2020, while nationwide enrollment dropped an average of 2.4%.

The reason for New Hampshire's decline in public school enrollment can be partly attributed to students transferring to private schools, which were more likely to offer in-person learning during the pandemic, or homeschooling. The decline has some school officials worried about public school funding for next year, as it is directly tied to enrollment. A bill currently in the New Hampshire House aims to fix this problem by allowing the Department of Education to use pre-pandemic enrollment numbers to calculate funding for school year 2021-22. The bill, SB 135, is scheduled for a committee work session May 13, and for executive session on May 20.

Daily student attendance rates in New Hampshire are also lower than the national average this year. The report estimates the number of students attending school daily dropped 4.72% from the 20192020 school year to the 20202021 school year. Nationwide, daily attendance is estimated to have declined by 2%.

The report estimates the average salary for a classroom teacher and instructional staff member in New Hampshire – including principal, guidance counselor or librarian – is \$61,789 this year, a number that is below the national average of \$65,090 for teachers and \$67,818 for instructional staff.

"For nearly 30 years the State of New Hampshire has ignored the spirit of the original Claremont funding decision. As a result it has shifted its responsibility to local communities, creating funding inequities across the state.

We welcome the Fall Mountain, Claremont, Newport and Hillsboro-Deering School Districts, and encourage other districts to join us in ensuring the state meets its constitutional responsibility to the children of New Hampshire."

KIMBERLY RIZZO SAUNDERS, ConVal superintendent