

AFT-NH Legislative Bulletin

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Slowly, ever slowly, the 2017 legislative session crawls towards its June 22 conclusion. Yesterday, the House and Senate both met in session, though for the House, it was certainly the shortest meeting of 2017, not even lasting one hour. The primary, in fact the only order of business, was to consider reports from the Senate. These are when the Senate has amended a bill that originated in and passed the House, and now it gets sent back to the House for further consideration. The choices are simple. First, the House can concur/accept the Senate’s amendment, meaning the bill is now passed and sent to the governor. The second choice is to simply non-concur/reject the Senate’s amendment and thereby kill the bill. The third option is to request a Committee of Conference, wherein the House and Senate each appoint conferees who meet and try to reach agreement on the bill. All Committees of Conference must finish their work by June 15, and then the House and Senate will vote on June 22 to accept or reject those Conference reports where agreement was reached. And that, folks, should be the end of the session, until the legislative process starts to wind up again in September.

The House quickly disposed of the bills acted upon by the Senate today, and now the Committees of Conference are organized and underway, with the most important being those dealing with the Senate’s budget proposal, the Senate’s version of the NH capital budget, and the so-called “trailer bill.” This last is often the most interesting, for it is here that statutory changes are made to accommodate the provisions of the State budget, but often other sorts of items have a tendency to “sneak in.” Everyone in the media will be closely watching what happens in these Committees of Conference over the next week. Many House Republicans want deeper budget cuts than Senate Republicans and larger cuts in business taxes, so the real battle will be an intra-party battle amongst Republicans. The minority Democrats are certainly not pleased with the Senate’s budget, and will look for openings to push their own agenda items (for example, limiting business tax cuts, more spending on opioid crisis, no punitive legislation directed at Planned Parenthood and limiting women’s health choices). So the battle will rage on, though largely in Committees of Conference and in behind-the-scenes negotiations, so we will just need to wait and see.

School Voucher Bill With the House session ending very early, the House Education Committee used the free time to hold a work session on SB 193, the voucher bill. This bill would rob public education in order to fund private education via the use of vouchers or education savings accounts.

The bill has been retained by the committee for 2017 but will need to be acted upon in 2018. Today, representatives from both parties raised the same concerns as before, focusing upon the lack of any accountability regarding effectiveness of private schools, the role played by public funding of religious schools, and the overall constitutionality of using public funds to pay for private education. Other issues raised included whether private schools could be required to accept students with special educational needs or conversely, whether such schools would be allowed to set their own academic standards for admission? And then there are the cost issues—what sorts of cost controls would exist regarding private schools, how would the decline in funding for public education be met (if one student in each grade leaves for private schooling, you can't really cut any staff but the public school would lose significant funding). There is even the question of what happens if a parent enrolls their child in a private school, takes the money, and then at some point in the year, transfers their child back to the public school—what happens to the money expended? These and many other crucial questions still swirl around SB 193, but above all else, there is the question of “Choice for whom?” Who is privileged and in the best position to take advantage of this giveaway of taxpayer money? Is this fair? Did not sound like it when one Republican representative blurted out that monies spent on educating “black children and Latinos” could be put to better use funding the SB 193 giveaway.

In the end the Committee made no further progress and will take up SB 193 again in September 2017. For now, the bill remains a bad piece of legislation. If there are problems in public education, the legislature would make better use of its time trying to resolve those problems, rather than taking money from public education and showering it upon those best positioned to send their children to private schools. Not much fairness and equity there!

In Solidarity,

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