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WRITTEN TESTIMONY

PRESENTED TO THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

**FEBRUARY 20, 2007
ON SENATE BILL 18**

BY

**SUSAN D. ALLEN, PRESIDENT
NEW HAMPSHIRE SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION**

Good morning Madame Chair, and members of the Education Committee:

My name is Susan Allen. I serve as President of the New Hampshire School Boards Association, and as a member of the Gifford School Board.

The New Hampshire School Boards Association is pleased to support **SB 18**. This Bill dramatically focuses us on the compelling need to address our pupils who have historically been at risk of dropping out.

As I know all of you know, our public schools have been doing a very good job in addressing the dropout challenges that face us.

As evidence of this positive trend, the most recent information from the Department of Education demonstrates that the number of dropouts decreased again, a 3-year downward trend. And this data is even more significant, when you consider that our public high school enrollment actually increased during that same time, peaking at an all time high of 67,347; and, while this happened, the number of dropouts declined, and the annual rate dropped from 3.8% to 3.2%. The cumulative dropout rate for all high school students declined from over 13% to 12.2%.

These are significant positive developments, and we applaud all in our State that contributed to this great news.

However, our school boards recognize that much more needs to be done to address this population of students. It is of great concern to us that young people from families in the lower income level drop out of school at a greater rate than that of youth from families with higher incomes. This, amongst other challenges, prompted specific discussion of this issue at last fall's Delegate Assembly of NHSBA, our annual meeting of member school boards throughout the state where issues are debated and resolutions adopted. Last November, the NHSBA Delegate Assembly adopted the following resolution:

NHSBA supports legislation raising the age of compulsory attendance in school for children who have not graduated from age 16 to age 18. Such change in statute shall also require the establishment and funding, per NH Constitution, Part Two, Article 28-a, of programs to support students at risk, including dropout prevention programs and other alternative options that allow students to continue a program of study to complete their high school education.

SB 18 calls for a comprehensive approach to this issue. While cooperation and coordination among various state agencies will be necessary as we initiate programs and provide services to meet the needs of these youth, some of the critical groundwork has already been done.

We are proud to have worked with our State Board of Education, and Education Commissioner, Dr. Lyonel Tracy, to support the enactment of new Standards of Approval for our Schools. And, we enthusiastically applaud and support Commissioner Tracy's new 'Follow the Child' initiatives.

Both of these recent strategies provide an effective roadmap for our schools - with each containing much needed flexibility at the local level - to address the many challenges posed by the dropout issue.

The Governor's Budget Proposal doubles the dropout prevention program to provide at-risk students with tutoring and additional assistance to complete high school. In addition, there will be an expansion of the capacity at our state's adult high schools for students who do not do well in traditional high schools, and the state's vocational tuition and transportation aid would be increased to provide more access to our state's tech centers for regional alternative programs.

These are important proposals to be resolved by the legislative process. In conjunction with this help, school districts can address the dropout issue, consistent with **SB 18**, by looking at alternative approaches to learning aimed at meeting the needs of lower performing students. Good programs already exist, and I am extremely proud to give one example that my school board has initiated.

Gilford has developed an initiative we fondly call the 'Meadows Program'. Several years ago, Ray and Barbara Carye donated to the school district 66 acres of land that includes a farmhouse, large barn, greenhouse, and garage, and this property has become known as the Meadows Property. At this property, the Gilford School District started an alternative education program that addresses the needs of our students that do not thrive in the "traditional school classroom". We found that changing the environment can truly make a significant difference.

Our students spend a portion of their day on the required academics and then are bussed to the Meadows site for a more "hands on" instruction. While there, the students are given the opportunity to apply their academics in "real world learning". One example is that our students have built and sold Adirondack chairs and other wood products. This opportunity has explored many dimensions, and has introduced our students to the working/ business world. By incorporating a "different approach" with the students participating in this program, we find that they remain interested and want to learn. AND, they are staying in school!

The new standards for school approval also provide opportunities that are consistent with the theme of **SB 18**. The new standards allow distance education courses to be an integral part of our programs. The new standards contain other viable options, such as using extended learning opportunities to gain credit, or to supplement regular programs. Independent study, internships, community service, and other approaches also may qualify for credit based on demonstration of competency. The new standards are still in transition, but they provide much opportunity for all, and much promise for addressing our dropout issues in a positive manner.

We recognize that there may be additional costs associated with **SB 18**, and any additional costs should certainly be assessed and addressed. Governor Lynch has begun this assessment with his budget proposal. We also recognize that the cost of doing nothing will be greater. Our overriding focus must be on how we can best assist and support these at-risk students. We must help ensure, in every reasonable way, that they have the opportunity to graduate from high school - and that they are equipped with all it takes to participate fully in our modern world. To do less will be a great disservice to the very students that need us the most.

Thank you for your time, and I would be happy to entertain any questions.