

SCHOOL VOUCHERS: A STEP BACKWARDS IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

TSBA

What are School Vouchers?

A school voucher is a publicly funded credit or certificate whereby a student may be enrolled in a private school and apply the credit to tuition. The idea is to create a competitive marketplace where parents and students have a choice outside of the public school system. The realities of school vouchers, however, tell a very different story.

The Realities of School Vouchers

NO EFFECT ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Numerous studies have found no clear advantage in academic achievement for students attending private schools with vouchers.¹ Many school voucher proponents argue that a voucher system allows children to perform better because of greater educational opportunities at private schools. However, statistical studies and test scores have debunked this myth and shown that a student does not have greater academic success just because they attend a private school. In reality, the product is an underfunded public school, and a student who may not have access to all the services available to a public school child.

CHOICE

Proponents of school vouchers have the assumption that eligible students have the ability to choose the school they wish to attend, when in fact that is not what actually occurs. Private schools choose the student; the student does not choose the school.

A student applying for a seat in a private school must meet certain “qualifications” in order to attend the school, regardless of whether the child has a voucher. These enrollment policies have restrictions, and the school can refuse to enroll the child if he or she does not meet the school’s requirements. Private schools are not public institutions, so the “qualifications” they may have for students could undermine the fundamental ideas of equality in education. A voucher program would force the public to supplement these policies, even if they are contrary to state and federal education law. Additionally, a student could be dis-enrolled by the private school at any time, just because the student may fail to meet certain future “qualifications.”

LACK OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

The need for special education programs is well established in the public school system, and many students can only find the help they need in public schools. Special education services are available in all public schools, but not in private institutions. In reality, many parents and children voluntarily leave the school voucher program because these programs are not offered in private schools. Many students today are dealing with physical, emotional, or learning disabilities and public schools are the only resource they have to combat these issues. A Department of Education study concluded that students in a voucher program are less likely to have access to learning support and special needs programs, tutors, counselors, cafeterias, and nurses’ offices².

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¹ Keeping Informed about School Vouchers, http://www.cep-dc.org/cfcontent_file.cfm?Attachment=Usher%5FVoucher%5F072711%2Epdf

² U.S. Dep’t of Ed., *Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: Final Report* at 19-20 (June 2010) (2010 U.S. Dep’t of Education. Report).



Removing the funds from public schools through a voucher program eliminates some of the funding required to ensure these services continue in the public school system.

ACCOUNTABILITY

School voucher programs have historically lacked accountability. Public schools are governed by an elected board of education who must answer to the people, not private school administrators. Numerous studies have found school voucher programs prevent oversight and accountability in the use of federal, state, and local educational tax money.³ Private schools can remove a student's First Amendment, due process, and other constitutional and statutory rights that are guaranteed in the public school system. Private schools are not subject to the same teaching, curriculum, and testing requirements as public schools and may not be required to meet state accreditation standards. Voucher programs force the public to support two drastically different educational systems.

The Importance of Public Education

The public school system provides two critical requirements that are not offered in a private school setting: the freedoms guaranteed in the state and federal Constitutions and access to resources that ensure the education and growth of all students. It is imperative that public school systems continue to operate and provide these opportunities. Removing funds from public schools through a school voucher system hinders these goals, and ultimately takes away from all students.

We must embrace educational reforms and initiatives, but failing theories should be discarded when reality shows they do more harm than good.

The Tennessee School Boards Association is dedicated to the highest standards of public education that is overseen by a local board of education. We urge the General Assembly to recognize the importance of achievement, accountability, and special education in the public school system and to reject any attempts to institute a school voucher program.

A statewide, nonprofit organization, the Tennessee School Boards Association is a federation of all the state's school boards. TSBA's mission is to assist school boards in effectively governing school districts. Through the years, TSBA has helped school boards and their members reach their highest potential through Association programs, meetings and services. TSBA also provides school board members a collective voice in matters of legislation and public education concerns. For more information about TSBA, visit our website at: www.tsba.net.

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³ U.S. Govt' Accountability Office, *District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program: Additional Policies and Procedures Would Improve Internal Controls and Program Operation*, Publication No. 08-9, 22-23, 33-36 (Nov. 2007) (GAO Report)