

The National Coalition

for

Public Education

July 8, 2015

Re: We Oppose Portability and Vouchers in S. 1177, the Every Child Achieves Act

Dear Senator:

The undersigned organizations write to express our strong opposition to the inclusion of any provision in S. 1177, the Every Child Achieves Act, that would create or lead to a private school voucher. In particular, we oppose adding the CHOICE Act to this bill, which would create a private school voucher program for children living on military installations, transform Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funding into a private school voucher, and expand the D.C. voucher. Our opposition also extends to any amendment that would make Title I funding portable by allowing the money to follow a child to that child's public or private school.

Title I Portability Is a Stepping-Stone to Vouchers

We are concerned that Title I portability is a stepping-stone for an expansion of vouchers for private and religious schools using either federal or state funds, which our organizations vehemently oppose.

Congress adopted Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 to provide federal funding to local school districts and schools that serve large concentrations of students in poverty to address the compounded impact of poverty on student learning. Today's Title I dollars flow to the states, which then distribute the dollars to school districts based on the number of students in poverty and the percentage of total students in poverty in each district. As a result, school districts and schools within the state receive different allocations of Title I funds. This weighted formula ensures that poorer, smaller, under-resourced districts receive a greater share of Title I funds than more affluent districts. The Title I portability language in this bill would dismantle Title I's funding formula and the funds would "follow the child."

Our concern that portability might lead to private school vouchers is bolstered by the fact that there were several failed attempts in the last Congress to turn Title I funding into a private school voucher by making the funds portable to both public and private schools. In addition, the main argument made by the supporters of portability—that the funds should follow the child—mimics that of voucher proponents. Furthermore, dismantling the Title I funding formula would allow the dollars to be more easily transferred to private schools to either create a voucher or to be combined with existing state voucher programs.

Portability Undermines Title I's Goal of Addressing Achievement Gaps in Poor Schools

We oppose portability not only because it could lead to vouchers, but also because it would have a negative impact on students and schools most in need. Allowing the funds to flow in equal amount to each child undermines the goal of Title I, which is to address the unique needs of schools and communities with a concentration of students in poverty. Portability dilutes the funds, stretches the dollars thinner, and diminishes the effectiveness of the funding.

Portability would also divest local school districts, principals, and other school leaders of important decision making authority to determine how to best use Title I funds. Currently, school districts make local decisions about how to best use their Title I funding. This allows them to “pool” Title I funds so that the highest poverty schools in the district receive the funds. Districts generally choose to invest their Title I funds primarily in their highest poverty elementary schools because addressing student learning needs at the earliest age possible produces the greatest return on investment. Districts also work with principals and school leaders to further target their federal dollars toward specific students within a school based on their academic needs. Portability removes this local control, which would diminish the effectiveness of the funds and create a cumulative negative effect on learning opportunities for high-need students.

School Vouchers Are Bad for Education and Students

In addition to opposing portability, we also oppose any amendments, such as the CHOICE Act amendment, that would create private school vouchers. We oppose private school vouchers because they run counter to the very purpose of ESEA. Vouchers divert desperately-needed resources away from the public school system to fund the education of a few, select students, with limited, if any, real impact on student academic achievement. Congress would better serve *all* children by using funds to make the public schools stronger and safer than by creating a new voucher program.

Instead of providing equal access to high quality education or setting high standards for accountability, voucher programs have proven ineffective, lack accountability to taxpayers, and deprive students of rights provided to public school students. The “choice” in voucher programs lies with the schools – not with students or parents. Private schools may turn students away for a variety of reasons, while public schools are open to all.

Vouchers do not improve academic opportunities. According to multiple studies of the District of Columbia, Milwaukee, and Cleveland school voucher programs, students offered vouchers do not perform better in reading and math than students in public schools.

Moreover, voucher programs offer little accountability to taxpayers. Private school voucher programs usually do not require participating private schools to comply with the same teacher standards, curriculum, reporting, and testing requirements as the public schools. And, private schools that receive voucher students do not enforce all federal civil rights laws, adhere to religious freedom protections provided under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, or face the same public accountability standards that all public schools must meet, including those in Title IX, IDEA, and ESEA—the very law this Congress seeks to reauthorize.

Conclusion

For these reasons and more, we oppose any amendments that would make Title I funds portable or permit a private school voucher program. ESEA should ensure that public dollars remain invested in public schools for the benefit of all students.

Thank you for your consideration of our concerns.

Sincerely,

African American Ministers In Action
AASA: The School Superintendents Association
American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC)
American Association of University Women (AAUW)
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)
AFL-CIO
American Federation of School Administrators
AFSCME
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO
American Humanist Association
Americans for Democratic Action (ADA)
Americans for Religious Liberty
Americans United for Separation of Church and State
Anti-Defamation League
Association of Education Service Agencies
Association of University Centers on Disabilities
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty
Center for Inquiry
CLASP
Council for Exceptional Children
Council of the Great City Schools
Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund
Disciples Justice Action Network
Education Law Center
Equal Partners in Faith
Feminist Majority Foundation
GLSEN
Institute for Science and Human Values, Inc.
Interfaith Alliance
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
League of United Latin American Citizens
National Alliance of Black School Educators
NAACP
National Association for Bilingual Education
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Federally Impacted Schools

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National Association of State Directors of Special Education

National Association of Secondary School Principals

National Black Justice Coalition

National Council of Jewish Women

National Education Association

National Organization for Women

National PTA

National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition

National Rural Education Association

National Urban League

People For the American Way

Public Advocates Inc.

Secular Coalition for America

School Social Work Association of America

Southern Education Foundation

Southern Poverty Law Center

TASH

Texas Faith Network

Texas Freedom Network