

February 1, 2017

The Honorable Virginia Foxx
Chairwoman
Committee on Education and the Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
2176 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington DC 20515

The Honorable Bobby Scott
Ranking Member
Committee on Education and the Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
2101 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott and Members of the Committee on Education and the Workforce:

On behalf of National PTA and our 4 million PTA members, we appreciate the opportunity to submit this letter in advance of the Committee's hearing on "Helping Students Succeed Through the Power of School Choice," scheduled for Feb. 2, 2017. National PTA is the oldest and largest volunteer child advocacy association in the United States, with congresses in all 50 states, DC, Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and Europe. For over 120 years, National PTA has been a strong advocate for public education and a reputable resource for empowering all families to effectively engage in their child's education.

Our association remains steadfast in our approach of putting the needs of all children first by advocating for high-quality public education. National PTA supports public education as the major vehicle for preserving the basic values of a democratic system of government. This system must be strengthened with the support of adequate funding, and continue to be governed by public officials.

National PTA supports educational choices within public schools so as to meet the needs of all students and believes parents and families should be involved in the planning, development, implementation and evaluation of public school choice plans. In addition, National PTA believes public school choice programs—special programs within a school, intra or inter-district choice, magnet or regional schools—should adhere to the following principles:

- Schools must provide adequate, objective and language-appropriate information to parents so they can make informed decisions
- Students must have access to free transportation to ensure equity
- Schools must offer a fair and open selection process
- Curriculum, personnel and student performance standards must be non-discriminatory and assure equal educational opportunities
- Public funds must be used for public schools only

However, there is a difference between public school choice programs and the use of taxpayer dollars for private school voucher programs. **National PTA opposes any private school choice proposal and/or voucher system that diverts public funds to private or sectarian schools.** Public dollars carry the responsibility for providing public access, governance and accountability. National PTA believes that public support of any school must not be allowed to detract or divert money from the continued operation of a viable system of public education.

We will oppose any attempt to funnel taxpayer funds to a private school voucher program such as—vouchers, tax credits, deductions or a portability scheme—that would divert public school resources. 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. 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. Congress would better serve all children by using funds to make public schools stronger and safer, rather than by creating a new voucher program.

Although promoted as “school choice,” private school vouchers do not provide real choice for students and parents. In fact, calling vouchers “school choice” is a misnomer, as they do not provide quality education choices to most families. Studies show that voucher programs often fail to provide adequate, objective and language-appropriate information to families in order to allow them to make an important and critical decision for their child. This is particularly troublingly to us at National PTA. The “choice” in voucher programs actually lies with private schools, which may turn students away for a variety of reasons. In contrast, public schools are open to all.

Students with disabilities are particularly underserved by voucher programs. Private voucher schools do not adequately serve students with disabilities, often denying them admission or subjecting them to inappropriate or excessive suspensions or expulsions. Nor do private voucher schools provide them with the same quality and quantity of services available to students in public schools, including those mandated under each student's individualized education plan (IEP). For example, in Washington, DC, a significant number of students who received a private school voucher had to reject their vouchers because they were unable to find a participating school that offered services for their learning or physical disability or other special needs.

Vouchers also fail to improve academic opportunities. Recent studies of the Louisiana and Ohio voucher programs revealed that students who used vouchers actually performed worse on standardized tests than their peers who were not in the voucher programs. Multiple studies of the DC, Milwaukee and Cleveland school voucher programs revealed similar findings: students who were offered vouchers did not perform better in reading and math than students in public schools. In fact, Department of Education studies of the DC voucher program show that students who participated in the program were actually less likely to have access to ESL programs, learning

support and special needs programs, tutors, counselors, cafeterias and nurse's offices than students not in the program.

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 public schools. And private schools that receive voucher students do not adhere to all federal civil rights laws, religious freedom protections provided under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and public accountability standards that all public schools must meet, including those in Title IX, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Finally, vouchers violate religious liberty by funding primarily religious schools. One of the most dearly held principles of religious liberty is that government should not compel any citizen to furnish funds in support of a religion with which they agree or disagree. Voucher programs, however, violate that central tenet: they use taxpayer money to fund primarily religious education. Parents and families certainly may choose such an education for their children, but no taxpayer should be required to pay for another's religious education.

For these reasons and more, we oppose private school vouchers. Congress must ensure that public dollars remain invested in public schools for the benefit of all students.

We appreciate the opportunity to share our views on public school choice and vouchers. If you would like additional information regarding National PTA's positions on these issues, please contact Jacki Ball, director of government affairs at (703) 518-1243 or JBall@PTA.org.

Sincerely,



Laura M. Bay
President
National PTA



Nathan R. Monell, CAE
Executive Director
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