

# The National Coalition

for

## Public Education

### OPPOSE S. 1968/H.R. 4000, the “Scholarship for Kids Act”

Under this bill, \$24 billion in taxpayer money would be funneled to private schools. Sixty-three percent of the federal dollars now being spent on K-12 education programs would be converted into private school vouchers under this bill. In addition to suffering from the problems that all voucher bills have in common, this bill would also undermine the main purpose of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which is designed to target federal funds to public schools with high concentrations of poverty in order to provide additional educational services for these students. Instead of sending federal taxpayer money to private schools, Congress should invest these dollars in the public schools that serve all students regardless of gender, disability, economic status, or educational achievement.

#### **Turning Title I into a Voucher Undermines Title I and Creates Administrative Nightmares for Schools**

- Turning Title I into a voucher directly conflicts with the original intent of Title I, which was first enacted in 1965 and has continued to be reauthorized with bipartisan support in Congress to target and support schools with high concentrations of poverty. Poverty greatly affects student learning and high concentrations of poverty in schools presents unique challenges. Title I was created to help these schools better serve their students by providing school-wide services and whole school reforms tied to raising student achievement, such as hiring additional teachers and classroom aides; improving curriculum; enhancing parent involvement; or extending learning time for students who need extra help. Turning Title I into a voucher, however, would completely dilute the funds, making it less likely that the schools in most need could provide these or other services needed by students.
- Allowing Title I funds to be transferred to private schools would create burdensome administrative and accounting problems for local school districts. Title I funds are not spent at a consistent rate, nor are they spent on a “per child” basis. School systems would need to significantly modify—if not completely overhaul—how they keep their financial records and create a burdensome and completely new federally-mandated bookkeeping system. Many school districts lack the capacity to build out or create a new system and federal funds would not cover this expansion. In addition, school budgets are set far in advance to allow for the extensive planning needed to hire educators and arrange classes. Making Title I a voucher would create constant disruptions in school planning and budgeting because of an unknown number of students who may change schools during the year, possibly even returning to their original school. The federal government should not add to existing administrative and accounting challenges facing 15,000 local school districts.
- According to the Congressional Research Service, Title I, Part A is currently funded at almost \$37 billion below its full funding level. Fully funding this program would be a far more effective strategy to ensure that children in poverty receive the supplemental services they need to achieve on par with their wealthier peers. Better still would be incentives to encourage states to adopt school finance systems that target funding to students based on their needs.

## **Vouchers Do Not Improve Opportunities for Kids from Low Income Families**

- A \$2,100 voucher payment does not come close to covering the entire cost of tuition or other mandatory fees for private schools. Thus, only families with the money to cover the cost of the rest of the tuition, uniforms, transportation, books and other supplies will be able to use the vouchers. In Cleveland, the majority of families who were granted a voucher but did not use it cited the additional costs as the reason.<sup>1</sup>
- Title I currently aids 23 million students. This bill would only provide vouchers for 11 million students at most, taking away resources from at least 10 million students who currently benefit from the program.

## **This Bill Allows Private Schools to Take Taxpayer Money But Deny Rights to Students and Teachers**

- Proponents claim that civil rights laws apply under this bill, but they fail to explain that many of the private schools that are eligible to take vouchers are exempt from key provisions in civil rights laws. These schools do not face the same public accountability standards that all public schools must meet, including those in Title IX, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and ESEA. And the bill explicitly states that religious schools that take vouchers will be allowed to discriminate against students based on gender and teachers based on religion.
- This bill doesn't create choice for parents, but rather choice for private schools, which can maintain their admission criteria and attendance rules. They can reject students based on economic status, academic achievement, disability and for some schools, even gender. And, although religious schools cannot reject students based on their religion, they can require students to engage in religious activities and instruction.

## **This Bill Lacks Accountability Measures**

- This bill provides no way to measure whether students would be getting the education they deserve or that taxpayer money is being well-spent. This bill lacks reporting and testing requirements that would allow the evaluation of student progress at private schools. It provides no requirement that private schools provide students with qualified teachers, sufficient services, or resources required to serve students. Further, the bill does not provide any monitoring requirements to ensure that the voucher funds are not mishandled.
- An examination of voucher programs currently in existence show that they cannot even meet the minimal accountability standards required. For example, two Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports<sup>2</sup> and a *Washington Post* investigation have all strongly criticized the DC voucher program for its utter lack of accountability. A "scathing" November 2013 GAO report said that "the local agency that administers D.C.'s school vouchers . . . has so many faulty internal systems and missing policies that it can't manage the program."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the Administrator itself, has been quoted as saying that quality control is "a dead zone, a blind spot" of the program.<sup>4</sup>
- Voucher proponents promise access to high quality private schools, but studies and experience prove otherwise. Studies show vouchers do not improve student education, or access to educational resources. Examples of the schools students can "choose" include: a Milwaukee school that accepted \$2.3 million of taxpayer funded vouchers but abruptly closed in the middle of the school year;<sup>5</sup> a school in Florida where classes were held in public parks once the school was declared unfit by the fire marshal;<sup>6</sup> or hundreds of schools that teach creationism in science classrooms.<sup>7</sup> Bad choices will not improve student achievement and because voucher programs have no quality controls, there is nothing to ensure that these schools can provide a quality education.

<sup>1</sup>Kim K. Metcalf, *Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program: Exploring Families' & Educational Choices: Technical Report*, 162 (Dec. 2003).

<sup>2</sup>US Gov't Accountability Office, District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program: Action Needed to Address Weaknesses in Administration and Oversight, Pub. No. 13-805 (Sept. 2013); US Gov't Accountability Office, District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program: Additional Policies and Procedures Would Improve Internal Controls and Program Operations, Pub. No. 08-9 at 5,36 (Nov. 2007).

<sup>3</sup>Lyndsey Layton, "D.C. School Voucher Program Lacks Oversight, GAO says" *The Washington Post*, Nov. 15, 2013, available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/dc-school-voucher-program-lacks-oversight-gao-says/2013/11/15/9bb8c35e-4e3d-11e3-be6b-d3d28122e6d4\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/dc-school-voucher-program-lacks-oversight-gao-says/2013/11/15/9bb8c35e-4e3d-11e3-be6b-d3d28122e6d4_story.html)

<sup>4</sup>Lyndsey Layton, "Quality Controls Lacking for D.C. Schools Accepting Federal Vouchers," *The Washington Post*, Nov. 17, 2012, available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/quality-controls-lacking-for-dc-schools-accepting-federal-vouchers/2012/11/17/062bf97a-1e0d-11e2-b647-bb1668e64058\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/quality-controls-lacking-for-dc-schools-accepting-federal-vouchers/2012/11/17/062bf97a-1e0d-11e2-b647-bb1668e64058_story.html).

<sup>5</sup>Erin Richards, "Leaders of Closed Milwaukee Voucher School Are Now in Florida," *The Journal Sentinel*, Jan. 15, 2013, available at <http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/leaders-of-closed-milwaukee-voucher-school-are-now-in-florida-b99185323z1-240384541.html>.

<sup>6</sup>Gus Garcia-Roberts, "McKay Scholarship Program Sparks a Cottage Industry of Fraud and Chaos," *The Miami New Times*, June 23, 2011, available at <http://www.miaminewtimes.com/2011-06-23/news/mckay-scholarship-program-sparks-a-cottage-industry-of-fraud-and-chaos/>.

<sup>7</sup>Chris Kirk, "Map: Publicly Funded Schools that are Allowed to Teach Creationism," *Slate.com*, Jan. 26., 2014, available at [http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/science/2014/01/creationism\\_in\\_public\\_schools\\_mapped\\_where\\_tax\\_money\\_supports\\_alternatives.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2014/01/creationism_in_public_schools_mapped_where_tax_money_supports_alternatives.html).