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Re: Oppose SB 48 – Private School Vouchers Are Bad Education Policy

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the Florida members and supporters of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, I write to urge you to oppose SB 48. This bill would consolidate and expand the state's private school voucher programs yet address none of the systematic problems that currently exist in any of them. Furthermore, our public schools already are dealing with economic uncertainty and bracing for budget cuts due to the pandemic. The state should not strip them of additional public funds. Public dollars should fund public schools, which serve 90% of America's schoolchildren.

This Bill Does Nothing to Address Any of the Systematic Failures in the State's Current Voucher Programs

Studies and investigations of the Florida voucher programs show that they aren't working. There is no evidence that they are improving student achievement. To the contrary, a study of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program found that students who used a voucher and then returned to public school performed worse on standardized tests than students who didn't use a voucher.¹

Schools that accept vouchers also lack proper oversight and accountability. They do not have to employ certified teachers, teach to the state standards, or give their students the assessment tests mandated of public schools.² And of the more than 2,100 Florida schools that take vouchers, 70 percent are unaccredited.³ A long-term investigation by the Orlando Sentinel found that voucher schools have falsified fire-safety and health records, hired staff with criminal convictions, and held classes in potentially dangerous buildings.⁴

¹ Zahid Kisa et al., [Evaluation of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program Participation, Compliance and Test Scores in 2018-19](#), 25, Fla. State Univ., Jun. 2020. This is typical of voucher programs across the country. Studies of the Louisiana, Indiana, and Ohio voucher programs have revealed that students who used vouchers perform *worse* academically than their peers. In addition, studies of voucher programs in Alabama, Milwaukee, Cleveland, and the District of Columbia found that students offered vouchers showed no improvement in reading or math over those not in the program. National Coalition for Public Education, [Vouchers Do Not Improve Academic Achievement](#) (last accessed Jan. 31, 2021).

² Kate Santich and Annie Martin, [Florida Voucher Critics: Spend Money on Public Schools Instead](#), *Orlando Sentinel*, Feb. 21, 2020.

³ Education Week, [Florida's Voucher Program: Data Snapshot and List of Participating Schools](#) (last accessed Feb. 20, 2021).

⁴ Leslie Postal, Beth Kassab, and Annie Martin, [Schools Without Rules: An Orlando Sentinel Investigation](#), *Orlando Sentinel*, Oct. 17, 2017.

Yet, this bill, which would consolidate all of the state's voucher programs into two programs, does nothing to address these systematic problems. Instead, SB 48 would actually decrease the little oversight that does exist. For example, while current law requires annual audits of scholarship funding organizations, the bill would only require audits at least every three years. Audits ensure efficiency and compliance and prevent fraud. Reducing them will make it harder to identify and correct accounting and other mistakes, and it will make it easier for people to abuse the program.

Florida Should Not Drain Additional Funds from Public Schools

Florida already spends approximately \$1.3 billion per year to pay for vouchers,⁵ and this bill would increase total spending on private schools. Especially at this time, when the COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented challenges for our public-school system, the legislature should prioritize the funding of public schools, not private school vouchers. If we do not sufficiently fund our public schools, there is no fall back.

Public schools are facing mounting costs as they work to ensure that students are able to safely and appropriately receive the education and services they need. At the same time, the state is already expected to cut public education funding because of a \$5 billion reduction in revenue.⁶ In contrast, Florida private schools have already received nearly \$275 million in forgivable loans through the federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP).⁷ Many of these schools have large endowments or high tuition costs. For example, Ransom Everglades School, which charges a tuition of more than \$41,000 a year and has an endowment of more than \$40 million, received between \$2 to \$5 million.⁸ St. Andrew's School in Boca Raton received an amount in the same range, even though it has an endowment of more than \$19 million.⁹ Congress also recently passed another COVID relief bill that provides federal funding for assistance and services in private schools. The legislature, therefore, should not send more money to private schools when public schools face extreme budget shortfalls.

This Bill Continues to Allow Voucher Schools to Discriminate

This bill also does nothing to end discrimination in the state's voucher programs. Private schools do not abide by federal civil rights laws that apply to public schools. Unlike public schools, private schools accepting vouchers often deny students admission or expel them for a number of reasons. These include religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, academic abilities, disciplinary history, or ability to pay tuition. In 2019, for example, 156 Florida private schools that received a voucher had explicit anti-LGBTQ policies or views, including

⁵ Santich and Martin.

⁶ Dara Kam, [New Florida Senate President Eyes Education Funding Amid Budget Woes](#), *News4Jax*, Nov. 18, 2020.

⁷ This number is an estimate based on the midpoint of possible PPP large loan ranges. It does not include any loans that Florida private schools may have received for amounts below \$150,000. Samantha Sokol, et al., Ams. United for Separation of Church & State, [The Paycheck Protection Program Has Provided Billions in Federal Funds to Private and Religious Schools](#), 6 (Jul. 29, 2020).

⁸ [Expensive Miami Private Schools Got Millions in PPP Loans. So Did Charter Schools](#), *Miami Herald*, Jul. 21, 2020.

⁹ Sokol at 5.

83 schools that refuse to admit or could expel students because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.¹⁰

And although two of the voucher programs altered under this bill are supposed to serve students with disabilities, these students lose their rights when accepting a voucher. These students forfeit many of the protections provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) because they are considered parentally placed in private schools and lose the quality and quantity of services available to students in public schools. This bill does nothing to protect these students.

No school that receives public funds should be able to discriminate against a student. Yet, this bill does nothing to prohibit discrimination.

Conclusion

For all the above reasons, Americans United opposes SB 48. I have enclosed with this letter a document outlining further some of the problems associated with vouchers. Thank you for your consideration on this important matter.

Sincerely,



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¹⁰ Leslie Postal and Annie Martin, [Anti-LGBT Florida Schools Getting School Vouchers](#), *Orlando Sentinel*, Jan. 23, 2020.