

"SCHOOL CHOICE" AND VOUCHERS: WHAT'S AT STAKE FOR OUR SCHOOLS IN CHICAGO AND ILLINOIS?

School vouchers might be coming to Illinois soon. These plans give taxpayer money to parents to use to pay tuition to private schools (for-profit, non-profit and/or religious schools). The dollar amount of a voucher can vary, and often does not cover complete tuition at private schools. This is money that would otherwise go to fund public education for our children.



Under a Trump administration, the US Department of Education will strongly endorse and expand "school choice," another word for vouchers and other privatization efforts that undermine public schools. Federal education policy under President Obama and former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has already promoted "school choice" through the expansion of charter schools. The new administration will be ramping up the efforts to incorporate vouchers into their school choice plans.

The nominee for Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, is a strong proponent of vouchers, for-profit charters and the use of public money for religious schools, rather than an advocate for strengthening public schools. She and Trump believe that private business and competition in the marketplace are superior to public schools in providing education for our nation's school children.

DeVos and her appointees will have a negative impact on our public schools in Illinois and Chicago. Expect cheerleading for "school choice" and voucher initiatives from Governor Rauner and James Meeks, chair of the Illinois State Board of Education.

OUR VISION

Public schools, attended by 90% of American school children, are a pillar of our democracy. Voucher programs undermine the idea of universal public education. We are committed to protecting and expanding a public education system built on equality and excellence for all students.

We need to continue to focus on helping struggling public schools build capacity with enough funding, smaller class sizes, enriched curriculum, better professional development as well as expanding social supports for children in poverty. Moving toward a privatized, unregulated system will not strengthen public schools.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

1. Educate yourself, your Local School Council, your school staff and community organizations about voucher plans. See sources at the end of this document, and find more info at <http://bit.ly/ryhvouchers>.
2. Talk with your state representative and state senator now before these plans begin to be implemented. Hold a meeting in your community with other LSC's and your legislators. Find your legislators' contact info here: <http://bit.ly/yourLLGA>
3. Contact your US Representative and US Senators Durbin and Duckworth to voice your strong disapproval of any voucher programs and expansion of charters coming from the US Department of Education. Durbin is on record in 2015 for opposing voucher programs.
Senator Durbin: 202-224-2152 and 312-353-4952
Senator Duckworth: 202-224-2854 and 312-886-3506

PUBLIC SCHOOLS WOULD LOSE MONEY

Taxpayer money for private school tuition means less funding for public schools. Voucher plans take money designated for public schools and divert it to private and religious schools. Federal funding for schools that serve low-income children (currently over \$15 billion) could be made available to follow them to the private school of their choice. Our public schools in Chicago and Illinois are already underfunded.

STUDENTS USING VOUCHERS DO NOT DO BETTER ACADEMICALLY

Research shows that there is no substantial increased student achievement for children using vouchers in private schools. According to the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, none of the independent studies looking at the most long-standing voucher programs (Milwaukee, Cleveland and Washington, DC) found any statistical evidence that children who used vouchers performed better than children in public schools. Further they learned that the Indiana voucher program could actually lower student achievement in the state over time as it takes public taxpayer dollars away from the state's public education systems.

FEDERAL CIVIL RIGHTS AND ANTI-DISCRIMINATION LAWS MIGHT NOT COVER VOUCHER STUDENTS

Students in private schools generally do not have the rights and federal protections that are guaranteed in public schools. Private schools can exclude students based on gender, sexual orientation, religion, disabilities, etc. These laws include Title IV of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibiting segregation; Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments which gives protection from gender discrimination; and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which guarantees equal education to students with disabilities. It is not clear whether private schools would have to abide by these laws if they enroll voucher-funded students.

VOUCHERS FURTHER INCREASE INEQUALITY

Although advocates of vouchers argue that they will provide access to high quality private education for poor children, in practice, this does not happen. The "best" private schools have tuition that is out of the reach of most families, even with voucher support. Vouchers will only pay for a small fraction of the tuition charged at these schools. This really isn't the same kind of "choice" that middle and upper-income families have.

Also, as is the case for some existing voucher programs, vouchers can be used by families who were already choosing to send their children to private and parochial schools, as well as to parents who are not poor. (For example, Indiana's program is open to households with incomes of up to \$64,000/year.) Parents who had already made the choice to send their children to these schools would get taxpayer subsidies for tuition.

Voucher proponents say that these programs will create a marketplace for education where schools must compete for students. This increased competition, they say, will lead public schools to improve to keep and attract new students. How can public schools do this when their funds are diminished? As money is taken from public school budgets, low-income and working-class students will attend public schools that will be even more impoverished.

TAXPAYER FUNDS COULD BE USED TO PROMOTE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

In some parts of Illinois, religious schools might be the only alternative to public schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, over 80% of all private school students attend religiously-affiliated schools. While parents of course have the right to choose a religious education for their child, and churches are exercising their constitutional right of religious liberty, these schools if government-funded would require American taxpayers to support religious education institutions that promote specific religious doctrine, require attendance at religious services and possibly have religious criteria for hiring.

Providing taxpayer money for religious education is a violation of the long-held value of separation of church and state. The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment states that no government program may be designed to advance religious institutions. In Illinois, the Blaine Amendment states that payments of public funds to religious schools are unconstitutional. It is possible that both the Blaine Amendment and the First Amendment will be challenged in court.

PRIVATE SCHOOLS DO NOT HAVE PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

Private schools are not held to the same standards of accountability as public schools. They are not required to disclose how much money they spend on faculty, on resources or on materials. And private schools don't have to make their academic standards public or reveal what their curriculum is. Research shows that states with private school vouchers have not provided safeguards to protect against fiscal irregularities or educational deficiencies.

The ultimate recipient of voucher money are the owners and organizations that operate private schools. We are especially concerned about the possible proliferation of unregulated for-profit schools, operated by non-educators, who will make money from taxpayer subsidized tuition. Our taxpayer money will be used to fund private schools, but taxpayers won't know how the funds are being used!

SOURCES

"School Vouchers: The Wrong Choice for Public Education." The Anti-Defamation League
"Analysis of Indiana School Choice Scholarship Program." Center for Tax and Budget Accountability
"On negative effects of vouchers." Mark Dynarski. Brookings Institute
"Review of A Win-Win Solution and the Participant Effects of Private School Vouchers Across the Globe." Christopher Lubienski. National Education Policy Center
The Public School Advantage. Christopher Lubienski and Sarah Theule Lubienski. University of Illinois