

April 20, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer  
Minority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Minority Leader  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

RE: Oppose Any Effort to Add Private School Vouchers to the Next COVID-19 Relief Bill

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leader McCarthy:

The undersigned organizations write to express our opposition to any effort to insert a new private school voucher program, including a proposal announced by Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos to provide “microgrants” to students, in the next COVID-19 relief package.<sup>1</sup> DeVos’s “microgrant” proposal is simply a private school voucher program by another name: it would provide direct federal grants for educational expenses, including private or for-profit online learning courses and services provided by private schools.

We recognize the hardship many students and families are currently facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has led to an unprecedented interruption to our school systems, which has forced students and educators out of the classroom and left children and families without the same access to educational programs and services. It is during this challenging time that the federal government should focus on providing more resources to our public schools and public school educators, who are best equipped to serve all students, rather than siphoning limited resources to private schools and for-profit online learning programs.

### **Private School Vouchers Undermine Public Schools**

Public schools provide education to 90% of our country’s students. Private school voucher programs undermine our nation’s public schools by diverting desperately needed resources away from the public school system to fund the education of a few, select students in alternative settings. Voucher

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandra Hutzler, [Everything We Know About Betsy DeVos’ Microgrants for Students and Teachers Hit by Coronavirus Crisis](#), Newsweek (Mar. 31, 2020).

programs have proven ineffective in improving students' academic achievement,<sup>2</sup> lack accountability,<sup>3</sup> and fail to provide students with the rights and protections they would receive in public schools.<sup>4</sup> Funneling federal dollars to private and unaccountable education providers in a time of hardship for schools, educators, students, and families across the county is especially bad policy.

### **This Proposal Would Allow for Broad, Unaccountable Use of Taxpayer Funds**

Private school voucher programs are rife with accountability problems. They generally do not require participating private schools to comply with the same teacher standards, curriculum, reporting, and testing requirements as public schools. Without the inclusion of accountability measures and oversight provisions, there is great risk for waste, fraud, and abuse.

This program, for example, could divert relief funds to unqualified, unaccountable online vendors, which by design, cannot provide the same well-rounded, comprehensive education as in a brick-and-mortar school. The effectiveness of these programs has been shown repeatedly to be academically inferior.<sup>5</sup> Congress should not send federal dollars to such an unaccountable program.

### **This Program Will Not Help the Students Most in Need**

According to reports, this voucher program would direct funding to students with disabilities and low-income students. But voucher programs have been shown time and again to fail to meet the needs of students with disabilities.<sup>6</sup> Private schools accepting vouchers would likely have no obligation to accept nor appropriately serve students with disabilities. And, voucher schools often cannot provide the same quality and quantity of services available to students in public schools, including those mandated under each student's IEP. Given the additional challenges online classes present for some students, these vouchers could not possibly address the needs of these students, or fund the accommodations and services required by the student's IEP.

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<sup>2</sup> *E.g.*, Jonathan N. Mills & Patrick J. Wolf, Univ. of Ark., [The Effects of the Louisiana Scholarship Program on Student Achievement After Four Years](#) (Apr. 2019); Megan Austin et. al., Russell Sage Found. J. of the Social Sciences, [Voucher Pathways and Students Achievement in Indiana's Choice Scholarship Program](#) (2019); David Figlio & Krzysztof Karbownik, Fordham Institute, [Evaluation of Ohio's EdChoice Scholarship Program: Selection, Competition, and Performance Effects](#) (July 2016); U.S. Dep't of Educ., [Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts Three Years After Students Applied](#) (May 2019).

<sup>3</sup> *E.g.*, U.S. Gov't Accountability Office, GAO-16-712, [Private School Choice Programs Are Growing and Can Complicate Providing Certain Federally Funded Services to Eligible Students](#) (2016); U.S. Gov't Accountability Office, GAO-13-805, [District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program: Actions Needed to Address Weaknesses in Administration and Oversight](#) (2013).

<sup>4</sup> Julia F. Mead & Suzanne E. Eckes, Nat'l Educ. Policy Ctr., [How School Privatization Opens the Door for Discrimination](#) (Dec. 2018); Bayliss Fiddiman & Jessica Yin, Ctr for Amer. Progress, [The Danger Private School Voucher Programs Pose to Civil Rights](#), (May 13, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> *E.g.*, James L. Woodworth et al., Center for Research on Education Outcomes, [Online Charter School Study](#) (2015); June Ahn & Andrew McEachin, Educational Researcher, [Student Enrollment Patterns and Achievement in Ohio's Online Charter Schools](#) (2017).

<sup>6</sup> *See, e.g.*, U.S. Gov't Accountability Office, GAO-18-94, [Federal Actions Needed to Ensure Parents Are Notified About Changes in Rights for Students with Disabilities](#) 20-26 (2018); Joint Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review, [A Statutory Review of Mississippi's Education Scholarship Account \(ESA\) Program](#) (2018); Patrick J. Wolf et al., School Choice Demonstration Project, Univ. of Ark., [Special Education and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program](#) 17 (2012).

Moreover, school closures required to address the current public health crisis have revealed stark equity gaps among students in this country. A better use of funds is increasing the capacity of public schools to serve all students.

### **Microgrants May Be Appropriate for Higher Education, But Not for K-12 Education**

Microgrants may be appropriate for financial assistance for students attending colleges and universities, but not for K-12 education. Higher education is voluntary and costly, and microgrants in that context are an evidence-based practice to help students remain in college in the face of unexpected financial challenges. Our nation's public elementary and secondary schools, on the other hand, are compulsory and free for all students. Thus, it is unnecessary to provide this type of financial assistance for K-12 students; and, it is inappropriate to use the term as a ruse for creating a new private school voucher program.

### **Conclusion**

This unprecedented pandemic should not be exploited to promote unaccountable, inequitable, and ineffective private school vouchers. We urge you to reject any effort to force private school vouchers into the next COVID-19 relief package.

Sincerely,

AASA: The School Superintendents Association  
ADL (Anti-Defamation League)  
African American Ministers In Action  
American Atheists  
American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)  
American Federation of Teachers  
American Humanist Association  
Americans United for Separation of Church and State  
The Arc of the United States  
Association of Educational Service Agencies  
Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO)  
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC)  
Center for Inquiry  
Clearinghouse on Women's Issues  
Council for Exceptional Children  
Council of Administrators of Special Education  
Council of Great City Schools  
Disciples Center for Public Witness  
Disciples Justice Action Network  
Equal Partners in Faith  
Feminist Majority Foundation  
Freedom From Religion Foundation  
GLSEN

Interfaith Alliance  
Learning Disabilities Association of America  
NAACP  
National Association of Elementary School Principals  
National Association of Federally Impacted Schools  
National Association of Secondary School Principals  
National Center for Learning Disabilities  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Disability Rights Network  
National Education Association  
National PTA  
National Rural Education Advocacy Collaborative  
National Rural Education Association  
National School Boards Association  
People For the American Way  
Public Funds Public Schools  
Secular Coalition for America