



February 16, 2021

The Honorable Matt Dubnik
508-D Coverdell Legislative Office Bldg.
Atlanta, GA 30334

Dear Chairman Dubnik,

On behalf of the 95,000 Georgia educators who are members of the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE), we write to respectfully express opposition to HB 60, the Georgia Educational Scholarship Act (ESA).

The ESA voucher program outlined in HB 60 offers questionable benefit to students and undermines public schools. The proposed voucher plan:

- Copies voucher programs that resulted in student learning losses in other states
- Triggers loss of special needs students' rights to federally required services
- Penalizes school districts for implementing pandemic health and safety measures
- Strips public schools of needed funds
- Has inadequate quality and transparency measures to safeguard public funds

Recent evaluations of private school voucher programs in Washington D.C., Louisiana, Ohio and Indiana show declines in student learning in math and, in Ohio, reading as well. Earlier studies showed private school vouchers had, at best, an uneven impact on student learning. There is little reason to expect a different outcome in Georgia. (*See attached list of studies.*)

Under HB 60, students with an Individualized Education Plan would be required to waive their right to these services under the federal Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) if they participate in the voucher program. Similarly, students with a Section 504 plan would waive their rights under the federal Rehabilitation Act. Both laws protect the rights of students with disabilities or other conditions to fully participate in public education. Students could qualify for an ESA voucher because they have a disability or condition but move to private schools that do not provide services to assist with the disability or condition specified in their IEP or 504 plan. Participating private schools are not required to notify students and families prior to enrollment that they do not provide services.

Eligibility for HB 60 vouchers includes students enrolled in a public school in districts that do not offer students 100 percent in person instruction for a semester. This benchmark penalizes districts that provide virtual or hybrid instruction to ensure student and staff health and safety in time of unforeseen public health or other emergencies.

The cost of HB 60 would be significant for the state and districts. The Department of Audit and Accounts calculated the cost for a closely comparable voucher program proposed in 2019 could be \$542.6 million by its tenth year of operation. Under every scenario considered, the audit department concluded the state would incur millions more in additional costs. Assertions that the bill would save districts money ignore schools' fixed costs. Districts cannot reduce their expenditures by the amount of state funds that voucher students would divert from public schools.

This diversion of funding comes when public schools are coping with a state funding cut of \$383 million to Georgia's Quality Basic Education (QBE) school funding formula in the current school year and an anticipated cut of the same size in the upcoming school year. These reductions compound longstanding state funding shortfalls for school counselors, student transportation and other education expenses outside the QBE. For example, HB 283, passed in 2013, requires the state to fund school counselors for special education and gifted students, yet it does not. Districts' financial squeeze is even tighter as their costs have grown as student academic and mental health needs climb due to the pandemic. While federal CARES funds have provided much-needed financial support for districts as they navigate the pandemic, these funds are temporary and must be stretched to cover higher education costs over multiple years.

Parents' ability to compare prospective private schools with their children's public school is hampered by the lack of comparable data. Voucher students in HB 60's ESA voucher program would not be required to take Georgia Milestones. The pro-voucher Fordham Institute contends that parents should be able to compare the academic performance of all students who receive public funding, including voucher students, and the easiest way to do this is using the state assessment. The lack of comparable data would also impede lawmakers' ability to assess the program's costs and benefits and set clear benchmarks for removing private schools or other service providers that perform poorly, an accountability measure the bill lacks.

Other accountability measures in HB 60 should also be bolstered. Participating private schools should provide an annual financial audit and any verifying documentation requested by the commission. In addition, instructional experts from the public education sector should comprise half of the review committee membership.

There are multiple strategies lawmakers can pursue that would yield greater benefits for Georgia public school students instead of sending public funds to private schools through a flawed program. Legislators should:

1. Eliminate state austerity cut in full and address ongoing funding gaps including student transportation and school counselors.
2. Implement overdue transparency and accountability measures to Georgia's existing voucher programs.
3. Identify, implement and fund strategies to help public school students surmount learning and mental health challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thank you for your leadership and for your time.

Sincerely,



Margaret Ciccarelli
PAGE Director of Legislative Affairs

Cc: House Education Committee

Voucher Studies

Dynarski, M., & Nichols, A. (2017, July 13). More findings about school vouchers and test scores, and they are still negative. *Evidence Speaks Reports*, 2(18). Brookings Institute. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/ccf_20170713_mdynarski_evidence_speaks1.pdf

Figlio, D. & Karbownik, K. (2016). *Evaluation of Ohio's EdChoice Scholarship Program: Selection, Competition and Performance Effects*. Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Retrieved from https://edex.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/publication/pdfs/FORDHAM%20Ed%20Choice%20Evaluation%20Report_online%20edition.pdf.

Waddington, R.J., & Berends, M. (2018). Impact of the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program: Achievement effects for students in upper elementary and middle school. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 37(4), 783-808.

Wolfe, P. J., Mills, J. N., Sude, Y., Erickson, H. H., & Lee, M. M. (2019). How has the Louisiana Scholarship Program Affected Students? A Comprehensive Summary of Effects after Four Years. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, Department of Education Reform. Retrieved from <http://www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/LSP4-Policy-Brief-SCDP.pdf>