

Debunking the Myths about Vouchers:

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MYTH: Vouchers will rescue poor kids who are trapped in failing districts.

REALITY:

- The Senate's own fiscal note projects that only eight percent of students from the schools targeted by SB 1 will use a voucher; that's 6,500 of 72,000 eligible students.
- However, 65 percent of the students anticipated to receive a voucher are already attending private and parochial schools. This means most of the money from this proposal will go to students who aren't in public schools (or may have never attended a public school), further diminishing available resources for children still in public schools.
- Low-income families may still have to pay tuition on top of the voucher; money that many families do not have. Obviously this means that most students will stay where they are.
- The majority of low-income children will be left in under-resourced schools that will have even less financial support, which means fewer educational opportunities for those students.
- The best way to give poor students an opportunity to learn is to provide their local schools with the appropriate resources to ensure quality programs and a safe environment – schools for which they are eligible and can afford to attend.

MYTH: Vouchers are just for poor kids.

REALITY:

- The current version of SB 1 increases eligibility for vouchers to an income of \$78,225 for a family of four. The salary for a member of the House of Representatives is \$79,000.
- With only eight percent of students in low-performing schools expected to receive vouchers, SB 1 is definitely not a solution for poor students.

MYTH: Vouchers will give parents a “choice.”

REALITY:

- No student is guaranteed admission to any private school. In effect, their applications can be rejected for almost any reason.
- Voucher programs enable private schools, not parents, to maintain their “choice.” Private schools are permitted to retain their admissions standards; private schools can discriminate against students based on religious affiliation, ability or special learning needs, academic performance and ability to pay.
- Parents should have a real choice to send their kids to a community school that is appropriately resourced. They should not be forced to look for alternatives that may be unaffordable, burdensome, far away or that do not guarantee their student will be admitted and or that can dismiss their student at any time, including because of inability to pay rising tuition rates or due to academic performance.
- A voucher system would create an entitlement program only available to some people, directing resources away from communities rather than appropriately supporting all students.
- Our public structures promote opportunities for all students and strengthen our communities; they should not pick and choose individuals for special treatment.

MYTH: Students will have the same protections and rights they have now.

REALITY:

- Private schools have no legal duty to provide Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) --plans of specially designed instruction and related services to address the education needs of students with disabilities --unless the students are attending approved schools through placements made by an IEP Team or by orders of hearing officers. Private schools would have no duty to provide IEPs for students unilaterally enrolled by their parents through vouchers.
- All students with disabilities would give up their rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) by accepting a voucher.
- By accepting vouchers many students with disabilities would also give up their rights under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act to be free from discrimination and to reasonable accommodations.

- Public schools accept and provide for the education of all children and have a duty to protect them from discrimination. SB 1 does not require private schools to accept children with disabilities and it does not provide the extra funding needed to meet their special needs. In addition, if a family places a child with an IEP in a private school through this voucher program, the school has no legal duty to provide the IEP services to the child, serve the child in the “least restrictive environment,” provide Due Process rights, or otherwise offer the child the protections and services that children educated in public schools are entitled to receive.
- SB 1 specifically states that no student must be enrolled in a private school “if the participating nonpublic school does not offer appropriate programs or is not structured or equipped with the necessary facilities to meet the special needs of [the student] or does not offer a particular program requested.”

MYTH: Vouchers save taxpayers money.

REALITY:

- It is estimated that SB 1 will cost over \$1 billion to implement over the first four years. Much of this money will be taken directly from the current state funding to school districts, and handed out to just a small number of people who are making a choice for private and parochial schools- which they themselves should be responsible for.
- Most students will remain in our public community schools. They will receive fewer resources as state funds are diverted to the few.
- Tax dollars and shared resources should be used to support our shared goals and managed in accordance with our values. Directing funds to private institutions that aren't accountable, don't have fair access, and are just for the few isn't any kind of bargain.
- A good public education available to all children is essential to our economy and to our democracy. Every member of our community depends on the educational attainment of all members of society, whether or not we have children. The point of public education is not to provide an individual subsidy, but to create a “rising tide” of achievement for the benefit of all.

- Funding a fair public school system is an appropriate use of tax dollars and our shared resources. Providing individual subsidies without academic or fiscal accountability or fairness isn't.
- The median family income in PA is \$50,702 which means that many families would be contributing to the subsidy of families earning far more (\$78,225 for a family of four) rather than paying a fair tax for a shared resource.
- Pennsylvania cannot afford to invest \$1 billion in a program that has not been proven to be successful.
- SB 1 lacks the academic and fiscal accountability that will allow taxpayers to ensure that dollars are being effectively and appropriately used.
- SB 1 will add a whole additional level of bureaucracy to administer the vouchers, another expense for taxpayers.
- Pulling resources away from students to give them to families who choose private school just perpetuates the cycle of under-resourced schools.

MYTH: Vouchers are effective at improving student achievement.

REALITY:

- Research has not shown that vouchers are effective at improving student results.
- An analysis of research shows that the many of the studies commonly cited by voucher proponents were funded by ideological supporters, with results not supported by independent, objective research.
- Reputable research on voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland and Washington, DC indicates that these programs produce few if any statistically significant positive effects on student achievement. Publicly-funded vouchers have been linked to slight increases and decreases in reading and math scores, ranging from -.03 to .11 in effect size, but these effects are neither statistically significant nor meaningful change. (Research for Action).
- In short, there is little evidence that vouchers increase achievement for students who utilize vouchers.

- In fact, in the most recent study, students in Milwaukee’s voucher program performed worse than or about the same as students in Milwaukee Public Schools in math and reading on statewide tests.
- SB 1 does not require schools receiving voucher students to measure student progress, to comply with PA’s academic standards or to report student progress. Therefore, there is no way parents can determine if their student is receiving the education they need to be successful or even a better education than they were getting.

MYTH: Student achievement in public schools is flat.

REALITY:

- Academic achievement in Pennsylvania has increased impressively over the past eight years according to recent test scores.
- Pennsylvania was the only state in the country to improve test scores in both reading and mathematics at all tested levels from 2002 to 2008, according to the Center for Education Policy.
- Recently, CNBC ranked Pennsylvania 4th in the nation in education.
- Education Week ranked Pennsylvania as a “high-performing” state, placing seventh out of 50 states and the District of Columbia.
- Pennsylvania has demonstrated that money invested in proven programs will raise achievement in the classroom.
- The closer a district is to its funding adequacy target, the more students perform at or above grade level. Currently, 474 school districts are spending below their funding adequacy target.

MYTH: Accountability requirements are not needed; parents will determine if the program is working or not.

REALITY:

- Non-public schools are exempt from most state laws that govern public schools, including any regular standardized assessment measures, such as the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA).
- Although some private schools do administer assessments, they are not required to do so and the results are not public information.

- If test results are the standard measure of performance, then a number of other schools including private and charters are comparable in performance to the 144 schools that are on the list for being low performing.
- Taxpayers could be paying for students to go to schools that are academically worse than their current schools.
- Whether taxpayer money is being used effectively should not be determined by individual opinion; it is appropriate to attach conditions to how public money/tax dollars are used.

MYTH: There is a loophole that means that vouchers don't violate the Constitution.

REALITY:

- Lawmakers shouldn't be trying to do an end run around the Constitution.
- There are specific prohibitions in the Pennsylvania State Constitution that prohibit the use of public funds for sectarian schools, that bar appropriations to any specific person (except for higher education), and that prohibit appropriations to educational institutions that aren't accountable to the Commonwealth's standards.

The specific references:

- Providing tuition vouchers to students who attend sectarian schools violates Article III, Section 15 of the PA Constitution, which prohibits the appropriation or use of funds raised for the support of public schools to sectarian schools, and Article III, Section 29, which prohibits appropriations to sectarian institutions.
- Second, providing publicly funded tuition vouchers to individual students and/or parents violates Article III, Section 29, which bars appropriations made for educational purposes to any person except for higher educational purposes.
- Third, providing public funds, through tuition vouchers, to private schools violates Article III, Section 30, which prohibits appropriations to educational institutions that are not under the absolute control of the Commonwealth unless the appropriation is supported by a super-majority of the elected members of each house.