

January 22, 2023

The Honorable Glen Davis
Chair
Education Committee
Virginia House of Delegates
900 East Main Street
Richmond, VA 23219

The Honorable Jon Avoli
Vice Chair
Education Committee
Virginia House of Delegates
900 East Main Street
Richmond, VA 23219

Re: Oppose HB 1821—Private School Vouchers Are Bad Education Policy

Dear Chair Davis and Vice Chair Avoli:

On behalf of the Virginia members and supporters of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, I write to urge you to oppose HB 1821, which would expand eligibility for the so-called “education improvement scholarship” voucher program that funds private school education. This bill should be rejected because it would send money to parents who can already afford to send their kids to private schools and does not address the systemic problems with vouchers.

HB 1821 Would Send Taxpayer Funding to Parents Already Paying for Private School

The bill would make every student in the Commonwealth eligible to receive the voucher.¹ Statistics from states with statewide voucher programs, however, show that the overwhelming majority of voucher students never attended public school. In Arizona, for example, 80 percent of voucher applicants were not in public school, and nearly half of applications came from the wealthiest quarter of families in the state.² And in New Hampshire, just 27% of students who received a voucher for the first time this year came directly from a public school.³ This means that the majority of funding is subsidizing tuition for students who never even attended public schools.

It is unsurprising that most students who are using the voucher in these states didn’t previously attend public school because the cost of tuition at many private schools and

¹ Under current law, students who receive a voucher must either have been previously enrolled in public school for at least half the year or be entering kindergarten or first grade. HB 1821 would remove these requirements.

² [*Nearly Half of Universal Voucher Applicants from Wealthier Communities as Total State Private School Subsidies Reaches \\$600 Million*](#), *Grand Canyon Inst.* (Nov. 6, 2022).

³ Ethan DeWitt, [*Education Freedom Accounts Double After One Year; Most Recipients Outside Public School*](#), *N.H. Bulletin* (Sep. 15, 2022).

other expenditures, such as uniforms, transportation, books, and other supplies, often far exceed the voucher amount. Thus, much of the funding for the voucher is going to families who can already afford to send their kids to private schools and cover these additional costs. This bill would create an even bigger strain on the Commonwealth's education budget, which would come at the expense of public schools.

HB 1821 Does Not Address the Systemic Problems with Vouchers

There is no evidence that the voucher program is working. In fact, Virginia students who use a voucher, like those in other states, are likely performing no better—and possibly worse—than other students. Studies of the Indiana,⁴ Louisiana,⁵ and Ohio⁶ voucher programs revealed that students who used vouchers actually performed worse on standardized tests than their peers not in voucher programs. The learning losses in Louisiana and Ohio are worse than those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷ And studies of long-standing voucher programs in Milwaukee,⁸ Cleveland,⁹ and Washington, DC¹⁰ found that students offered vouchers showed no improvement in reading or math over those not in the program.

Furthermore, private schools that accept this voucher—unlike public schools—don't abide by federal or state civil rights laws that apply to public schools and can deny students admission or expel them for a number of reasons, including based on their religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, academic abilities, or disability status. Taxpayer funded vouchers should not fund such discrimination at private schools.

Yet HB 1821 does nothing to address these systemic problems. Instead, it would increase the number of students eligible to receive vouchers, which would only exacerbate these problems.

Conclusion

For all the above reasons, Americans United opposes HB 1821. Thank you for your consideration on this important matter.

⁴ Megan Austin, R. Joseph Waddington, and Mark Berends, [Voucher Pathways and Student Achievement in Indiana's Choice Scholarship Program](#), 22, Russell Sage Found., 2019.

⁵ Parag A. Pathak & Christopher R. Walters, [Free to Choose: Can School Choice Reduce Student Achievement?](#), 10, Am. Econ. Journal: Applied Econ., Jan. 2018.

⁶ David Figlio and Krzysztof Karbownik, [Evaluation of Ohio's EdChoice Scholarship Program: Selection, Competition, and Performance Effects](#), 32, Fordham Inst., Jul. 2016.

⁷ Math scores dropped by 0.4 standard deviations in Louisiana and 0.5 standard deviations in Ohio, while the pandemic lowered scores by 0.2-0.27 standard deviations. Megan Kuhfeld, et al., [The Pandemic Has Had Devastating Impacts on Learning. What Will It Take to Help Students Catch Up?](#), Brookings Inst. (Mar. 3, 2022).

⁸ Patrick J. Wolf, [The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Final Reports](#), 7, School Choice Demonstration Project, Univ. of Ark., Apr. 2010.

⁹ Jonathan Plucker et al., [Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, Technical Report 1998-2004](#), 166, Ctr. for Evaluation & Educ. Policy, Univ. of Ind., Feb. 2006.

¹⁰ Ann Webber et al., [Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts Three Years After Students Applied](#), 4, U.S. Dep't of Educ., May 2019.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nikolas Nartowicz", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Nikolas Nartowicz
State Policy Counsel