



# AMERICAN ATHEISTS

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February 1, 2023

The Honorable Delegate Davis  
Chairperson, Appropriations - Elementary and Secondary Subcommittee  
900 East Main Street  
Richmond, Virginia 23219

**Re: OPPOSE HB 1508, Testimony from American Atheists in opposition to bill that undermines public education to fund private schools**

Dear Chairperson Davis and Members of the House Appropriations - Elementary and Secondary Subcommittee:

As a Virginia resident, a parent, and State Director for American Atheists, which has more than 1,700 constituents in Virginia, I write in opposition to HB 1508. HB 1508 is a complex bill that expands public dollars used for private education for a few students to the detriment of many others. Private school tax credit scholarship and voucher programs increase educational inequality by taking needed resources from the public education system, a system that serves every child regardless of their beliefs, background, or necessary accommodations. We strongly urge you to reject this harmful bill.

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the “wall of separation” between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. American Atheists opposes the use of public dollars to fund private religious education.

Voucher programs and tax credit scholarships come at the expense of public school districts and communities statewide, regardless of whether a few students benefit from the vouchers.<sup>1</sup> When a public school loses a student to the voucher program, it loses thousands of dollars that help pay for teachers and classroom costs. These schools continue to have the same overhead with less revenue.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cofniff, Ruth. 2019. “Wisconsin’s school voucher expansion costs district millions.” *Wisconsin Examiner*, October 18, 2019. Available at <https://wisconsinexaminer.com/2019/10/18/wisconsins-school-voucher-expansion-costs-districts-millions/>.

<sup>2</sup> Strauss, Valerie. 2017. “A disturbing look at how charter schools are hurting a traditional school district.” *Washington Post*, January 9, 2017. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/01/09/a-disturbing-look-at-how-charter-schools-are-hurting-a-traditional-school-district/>; Turner,

As students leave public schools, public schools lose valuable resources. This doesn't just send the quality of education plummeting — public schools are often the only institutions in poorer communities with the mandate, capacity, and commitment to reliably serve communal functions. This includes ensuring children are reliably fed, as low-income families increasingly rely on school lunches for nutrition.

Moreover, taxpayer funded scholarship and voucher programs almost never provide students with full tuition — let alone cover the expenses of school supplies, uniforms, meals, or non-tuition school fees. This bill is no different. Only families who are already better positioned financially can take advantage of this program because they can cover the cost difference.

The marketing rhetoric espoused by private school profiteers often revolves around the idea that private schools teach kids better than public schools. However, studies from several states show that education outcomes for students using vouchers and scholarships are demonstrably worse than their public school counterparts.<sup>3</sup>

Voucher programs without proper oversight and accountability for the use of the funds are ripe for fraud and abuse. In states where these programs have already been implemented without strict accountability measures, parents have used the money to buy expensive electronics, beauty supplies, other non-education related expenses, and even an abortion.<sup>4</sup> HB 1508 expands and combines private school voucher and scholarship programs while simultaneously decreasing oversight and accountability by changing the frequency of audits from once per year to once every three years. This lack of oversight is alarming.

Funding religious private schools at the expense of public schools endangers the separation of religion and government, an essential component of religious freedom. One of the most fundamental principles of religious liberty is that the government should not compel any citizen to pay for another's religious indoctrination. However, voucher programs overwhelmingly benefit religious schools, some of which teach extremist dogma in lieu of fact. Many such schools also discriminate against students whose identities and beliefs are not endorsed by a

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Corner. 2017. "The Promise and Peril of School Vouchers." *NPR*, May 12, 2017. Available at <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/05/12/520111511/the-promise-and-peril-of-school-vouchers>.

<sup>3</sup> O'Donnell, Patrick. 2016. "Tuition Vouchers Aren't Helping Ohio Kids Learn More, New Study Finds." *Cleveland.com*, July 11, 2016. Available at [https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2016/07/tuition\\_vouchers\\_arent\\_helping.html](https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2016/07/tuition_vouchers_arent_helping.html); Stein, Perry. 2018. "Students In Only Federally Funded Voucher Program Perform Worse in Math." *Washington Post*, May 30, 2018. Available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/study-students-in-only-federally-funded-voucher-program-perform-worse-on-math/2018/05/30/4b6f00c8-6415-11e8-a768-ed043e33f1dc\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/study-students-in-only-federally-funded-voucher-program-perform-worse-on-math/2018/05/30/4b6f00c8-6415-11e8-a768-ed043e33f1dc_story.html); Winsor, Morgan. 2016. "Louisiana's Controversial Voucher Program Harms Poor Students, Lowers Grades, New Study Finds." *International Business Times*, Jan 10, 2016. Available at <https://www.ibtimes.com/louisianas-controversial-voucher-program-harms-poor-students-lowers-grades-new-study-2258417>.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Wingett-Sanchez, Y. and O'Dell, R. 2018. "Parents spent \$700K in school voucher money on beauty supplies, apparel; attempted cash withdrawals." *The Arizona Republic*, Oct. 29, 2018. Available at <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/arizona/2018/10/29/misspent-school-voucher-funds-exceed-700-k-little-recovered/1780495002/>.

particular church, and based on recent U.S. Supreme Court guidance, they lack labor protections for educators. This type of entanglement of religious organizations with government also endangers the religious freedom of those institutions, threatening their autonomy and opening them up to government audits, control, and interference.

For these reasons, we strongly urge you to reject this unnecessary and harmful legislation and, instead, to sustain and support public education in Virginia. If you should have any questions regarding American Atheists' opposition to HB 1508, and similar tax credit and voucher bills, please contact American Atheists' State Policy Counsel, Brittany Williams at [bwilliams@atheists.org](mailto:bwilliams@atheists.org).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dusty Sabourin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dusty Sabourin  
Virginia Assistant State Director  
American Atheists