

To: Vermont House Education Committee
From: Andrew B. Jones, Ed.D.
Re: H.258 Testimony
Date: February 22nd, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Dr. Andrew Jones and I currently serve as the assistant superintendent for Mount Mansfield Unified Union School District (MMUUSD) and as an adjunct instructor for the University of Vermont, with a focus on education policy. I have over a decade of professional experience working in the Vermont public school system, in addition to expertise on the topic of school privatization in the United States. I am also a tax paying resident of Lincoln.

I would like to emphasize my support for H.258. As someone who strongly believes in the institution of public education, I am gravely concerned by the 2022 *Carson v. Makin* ruling from SCOTUS. Supporting school vouchers for religious schools raises a number of alarms, including the very real potential to undermine our public education system.

Subsidizes the Wealthy

Vouchers for private religious schools will effectively subsidize the wealthy. Recent investigations into voucher programs in other states have shown that the majority of parents that utilize school vouchers already send their children to private schools (Schneider & Berkshire, 2023). Research from the National Coalition for Public Education indicates that 80% of voucher users in Arizona already attend private schools, while New Hampshire has 89% of voucher beneficiaries already attending private schools (Ravitch, 2022). Vouchers used for private religious schools allow for an upward transfer of wealth, which only exacerbates the growing inequality that exists in the United States.

Importantly, the amount of a school voucher may not completely cover the cost of all religious schools. This means that a voucher is really only useful to those that already have the funds to send their child to a religious institution. In short, vouchers to attend religious private schools are a boon for the privileged, but are not always a real choice for disadvantaged families.

Allows for Discrimination & Exclusion

Public schools are tasked with accepting and teaching *all* students. Private religious schools on the other hand have wide latitude to pick and choose who they want to accept. Though we have the Vermont Public Accommodations Act, recently we have seen that some religious schools are willing to disregard this important safeguard. The potential for

LGBTQ+ students to be discriminated against is very real. Additionally, students with disabilities could also be excluded. It can be very expensive to educate individuals with disabilities, which as Harris (2020) points out “...gives schools incentives to select students who, for example, come from higher-income families and do not have discipline issues or disabilities.” Schneider & Berkshire (2023) further assert that “...taxpayers are increasingly footing the bill for discrimination.”

In addition to the blatant discrimination and exclusion that some students could encounter, there is also the geographic reality of Vermont that may prohibit some families from accessing certain schools. Vermont is overwhelmingly rural in nature, with even local public schools being distant in some towns. There are only so many religious schools in Vermont and many of these will only be within reasonable driving distance for a select few. Thus the “choice” of attending a religious school is actually not a choice for many due to geographic constraints. Furthermore, there is generally no requirement to provide transportation for students who use vouchers to attend private religious schools. This means parents are on the hook to transport their children, which could be a challenging proposition for households where both parents work.

Defunds Public Schools

Vouchers that go to private religious schools funnel money away from the public school system. Any money that is siphoned away from public schools is harmful. Vouchers that go to religious schools will slowly undermine our public schools by taking away critical taxpayer dollars. Make no mistake that this is by design.

The argument for “education freedom” is nothing more than smoke and mirrors. The true goal for certain organizations and philanthropies is to completely dismantle public education by “starving the beast” (Schneider & Berkshire, 2020). Funneling money away from public schools is the goal. Allowing tax payer dollars to be used for religious school vouchers is one more nail in the coffin for public schools.

Conclusion

Public schools have been the cornerstone of our democracy since our nation’s founding. Everyone benefits from public education, whether they have kids in school or not. Schools are a public good whose aim is to ensure equality of educational opportunity for all students. Schneider & Berkshire (2023) argue that “In an age of staggering income inequality, America’s public education system remains one of the last and best mechanisms for advancing equal opportunity.” We need to safeguard our public schools. Democracy depends on it.

References

- Harris, D. N. (2020). *Charter school city: What the end of traditional public schools in New Orleans means for American education*. Chicago University Press.
- Ravitch, D. (2022, November 15). Josh Cowen: Vouchers are a disaster for students who leave public schools. *Diane Ravitch's blog*. <https://dianeravitch.net/>
- Schneider, J. and Berkshire, J. (2020). *A wolf at the schoolhouse door: The dismantling of public education and the future of school*. The New Press.
- Schneider, J. and Berkshire, J. C. (2023, February 13). Robbing from the poor to educate the rich: The bait of school vouchers and the switch to strangling public education. *The Nation*. <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/vouchers-attack-public-education/>