

DUAL ENROLLMENT FOR ALL VERMONT STUDENTS

Senators – Thank you so much for allowing me to speak to you today. My name is Peter Gilmore, I am Head of School at The Vermont Commons School in South Burlington where I have been for the past five years. I am a product of public schools in Massachusetts, graduate of Holy Cross College and Harvard University, and have worked in independent schools for the past 34 years.

As I sit before you I represent students and families who attend my own school, and the larger body of independent school families who know the value of this program and the benefits it once afforded so many of our children in the past. Today I will present a brief background of the Dual Enrollment Program as it pertains to the issues at hand, address what could be the compelling reasons for our current situation, and speak to the exact arguments used by the House Education Committee to deny vouchers to certain independent school students. I think you will find my reasoning clear, and my opinions based in equality and fairness. We want all Vermont students to have fair and equal access to the post secondary level opportunities that this program provides.

Background

The Dual Enrollment Program has as its goal to give students who are residents of Vermont access to courses in institutions of higher learning. It is meant to be used by students who seek to expand their education beyond what is available to them in their current school settings. The program was hailed by the House Education Committee as beneficial to all students who use it, the state college system where the services are supplied, and a cost savings to families later in life as earned credits can be applied to graduation and thereby lower overall tuition burdens. The major changes in the program that occurred last summer were that the scope of the program was doubled (where students can use two vouchers) and an exception was made disallowing certain independent school students from accessing any vouchers. I am here today as a representative of all of those students who for years could use vouchers, and now cannot. Because this issue is not about independent schools, it is about children.

Compelling Reasons

There are four classifications of children of taxpayers in Vermont: public school students, publicly funded independent school students, homeschooled students, and independent school students. The first two groups can use vouchers, and as of this year can use double the number of vouchers originally vested in the program. The third group is comprised of homeschooled students who can use vouchers despite having “opted out of the public school system”, and finally there are the independent school children who are denied the use of vouchers at all.

It is widely understood that for a class of people to be denied access to public goods, services or resources there must be a **compelling reason** for it. What is the compelling reason for the last group of students not to receive vouchers? The following are possible

compelling reasons one may posit for the change:

- **Is it because all students who have “opted out of the public school system” should not get vouchers?** No, because homeschool students can use vouchers, and according to the committee they have “opted out of the public school system”.
- **Is it because all students who attend independent schools should not get them?** No, because publicly funded students who attend our schools get vouchers, and again, it is not about schools it is about students.
- **Is it because all students who are not from families in need should be denied them?** No, because there are plenty of needy families in independent schools, and likewise there are far many more wealthy families in public schools. Besides, the program has never been directed strictly at families in need. Up until this summer it had been for all resident students no matter their socioeconomic standing.
- **Is it because their families do not pay taxes and should therefore not receive vouchers?** No, their families all pay taxes, just like everyone else, and they therefore should receive vouchers just like everyone else. These families help fund public secondary and post secondary schools.
- **Is it because there are many programs that are denied to independent school students and it is just another one?** No, because those programs are denied to all independent school students, and this law parses between funded and unfunded students as no other law to my knowledge does.

Committee Justifications

The following are the exact arguments, as reported to me, made by members of the House Committee in support of the legislation denying independent school families access to the Dual Enrollment Program.

- 1) **These families “opted out” of the public schools and public funds never go to students who do this.**
 - Vermont residents do not give up their rights to all public programs, or access to all public education funds just because they do not attend public schools. Among the many exceptions available to them are special education support, diagnostic testing funding, tutoring, speech and language remediation, participation on some public sports teams, access to VSAC financial aid courses and support services, and use of the drivers education programs.
- 2) **Independent schools are wealthy and can cover the cost of dual enrollment for these students**

- Independent schools in Vermont do not have large endowments, most are relatively young institutions, and live year to year on a shoestring. And again, this is not about schools, it is about students. The independent schools do not receive any funds or benefits – the funds travel from the town directly to the university.

3) Students who attend independent schools are generally better able to pay for college courses themselves.

- At Vermont Commons we have over one third of our students on financial aid including those funded by the public school systems. Over one third of our families cannot afford to pay 100% of our tuition. We dedicate over 16% of our gross revenues to financial aid each year. On the other hand, plenty of public school students who will use their vouchers can certainly afford to pay the college tuitions, in fact, our population reflects the socioeconomic diversity of Vermont, and therefore reflects those who can and cannot afford to pay. The program does not discriminate by income, but this recent decision does.

4) The Committee felt that policies that elevate the appeal of public schools should be preferred

- Here is where we differ significantly: policies that elevate the education of all resident students should be preferred. Policies that are fair should be preferred. Policies that are equal should be preferred. Policies that do not discriminate based on perceived income advantage should be preferred. Policies that respect that all children of taxpaying parents should have fair and equal access to post secondary programs should be preferred.

5) All independent schools do not want Dual Enrollment and do not accept the credits

- True some schools choose not to use this program. The reasons are varied but include not being in physical proximity to the state colleges. That is their prerogative, and I would argue that courses from any credit granting institution sanctioned by the state of Vermont are acceptable to our families.

6) Demonstrating that the Committee narrowed the impact on taxpayers, even a small amount, was enough to get the bill passed.

- Yes, it saved money, but at the expense a group of talented students, sons and daughters of resident, tax-paying, Vermonters who deserve the same fair access to post secondary education and equal treatment as the other three classes of students.

Please adopt the amendment that will restore equity and fairness to this program, because as it stands now it is unequal and unfair. It unjustly discriminates against a particular class of people for no compelling reason. These are hard working, engaged, responsible, resident students, from upstanding Vermont families – exactly the types of students you want to succeed in our state college system, and families who in their own ways support

public education. Please give these students the chance to once again participate in this program – for they are the most compelling reason of all.