



TO: The Honorable Members of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives
FROM: Pennsylvanians Opposed to School Vouchers
DATE: November 15, 2019
RE: HB 1800 - Vouchers for the Harrisburg School District

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we respectfully urge all members of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives to **vote no on any legislation, including HB 1800, that would implement a tuition voucher program** in the Harrisburg School District or any other public school in the commonwealth. Vouchers lack broad public support and ultimately undermine Pennsylvania’s constitutionally driven responsibility to provide every student in every community equal access to public education.

Countless studies, including a recently released 25-year meta-analysis from the Stanford University, prove that vouchers do not improve student achievement. These unaccountable programs would force taxpayers to fund two education systems, divert money from public schools for a small percentage of students who attend private and religious schools, and—most importantly—distract policymakers from solutions that could produce much better results.

No one denies that the Harrisburg School District is in a challenging financial situation. The reports of “illusionary budgets,” missing financial records, and wiped computers are more than disturbing. But directing taxpayer dollars to unaccountable nonpublic schools will only exacerbate the district’s deficit and upend progress that has been made. Harrisburg has been in receivership for less than six months, and the court-appointed receiver, working with school officials, is aggressively addressing the district’s financial and academic problems. Teachers and school leaders are getting more support and for the first time in years, their voices are being heard. HB 1800 undermines their efforts and the Financial Recovery law itself by imposing a voucher mandate that the local school district does not want.

We estimate that a voucher program will cost as much as \$8.5 million. There are already over 600 resident students in Harrisburg being transported to private and religious schools. These students would qualify for the voucher forcing Harrisburg to pay an estimated \$2.5 million just for current nonpublic students. If one assumes that anywhere from 10% to 20% of current Harrisburg public school students use the voucher, then the cost is an additional \$3 million to \$6 million.

As a result, HB 1800 would siphon precious taxpayer resources from an already financially distressed public school to private schools that are not accountable to the public for their decisions and results. Whereas traditional public education entities have strict requirements for public meetings, transparency, governance, academic achievement, testing/reporting, financial accountability and teacher quality standards, such requirements do not apply to nonpublic schools receiving taxpayer funded vouchers. In fact, HB 1800 expressly prohibits the commonwealth, the district, and the receiver from imposing additional accountability requirements on non-public schools not already authorized by law (page 4, lines 17-18).

Even more egregious, Speaker Turzai's voucher bill enables discriminatory admission practices and would allow non-public schools to refuse students, including those with special needs. Like previous voucher proposals, the bill lacks adequate protections for students with disabilities, requirements that participating entities adhere to the federal IDEA law and will not even ensure that such entities accept special education students. The bill states that nonpublic schools are not required "to accept or retain a student if the nonpublic school does not offer 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" (page 4, lines 19-23).

Singling out Harrisburg public schools for a "pilot" voucher program would set a dangerous precedent with the intent of continuing to aggressively expand the program to every public school in the commonwealth in the future. In any scenario, vouchers have proven to be an ineffective educational strategy that cost taxpayers money, underfund our public schools and distract us from approaches that could make a difference in the lives of our students. For all these reasons, we urge you to oppose HB 1800 or any other bill that would create a taxpayer-funded tuition voucher program.

Thank you.

Allies for Children
American Federation of Teachers – Pennsylvania
Education Law Center
Education Voters of Pennsylvania
Keystone Research Center
Keystone State Education Coalition
PA Association of Career and Technical Administrators
PA Association of Intermediate Units
PA Association of Rural & Small Schools
PA Association of School Administrators
PA Association of School Business Officials
PA Budget and Policy Center
PA Partnerships for Children
PA Principals Association
PA Parent Teacher Association
PA School Boards Association
PA State Education Association
Pennsylvania AFL-CIO
Pennsylvania Council of Churches

Philadelphia Federation of Teachers
Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers
Public Citizens for Children and Youth
Public Interest Law Center of Pennsylvania
Service Employees International Union - PA State Council