



May 18, 2022

Submitted via email

Rep. Jamie Raskin
Chair, House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
2154 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Opposition to School Voucher Programs

Dear Representative Raskin:

The Center for Inquiry (CFI) writes in response to the hearing you are holding on May 19, 2022, “Free Speech Under Attack (Part II): Curriculum Sabotage and Classroom Censorship.”

As you are likely aware, CFI is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing science, reason, and secularism in American law and public policy. We have worked with your office numerous times on issues central to CFI’s mission, and we appreciate our relationship with you and your staff members.

While the hearing is to explore issues related to punishing teachers who allegedly violate state laws by discussing certain topics, **we write to express our viewpoint that, whatever the concerns and threats currently facing public schools in America, the answer is not to increase funding for school voucher programs.** As such, we urge you and the other members of the Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties not to make recommendations relying on vouchers for private schools as part of this hearing.

Proponents of school voucher programs often make the argument that America’s public schools are fundamentally “broken” and do not adequately support the education of the students they are meant to serve. Instead, they assert, policymakers should funnel more funding toward voucher programs that will allow families to choose the school that is right for them – whether it be religious in nature, private and nonsectarian, or something else.

These arguments are dangerous and must be dismissed.

CFI opposes school voucher programs for several reasons. First, they divert students from public schools to primarily religious institutions, where, instead of science- and fact-based learning, students are subjected to religious indoctrination and coercion. Second, the private schools that stand to benefit from voucher programs are not subject to the same legal requirements as public schools, and they often discriminate against certain students based on religious ideology. Third, school voucher programs are prone to misuse and abuse, as borne out in recent examples.

CFI Executive Offices ▪ 1012, 14th St N.W. Suite 205 ▪ Washington, D.C. 20005

To begin with, school voucher programs primarily divert students to religious institutions. CFI believes that our nation's students are best served by attending public schools where they receive a proper, secular education. This includes a robust science curriculum based on reason and facts, so that students learn about evolution, biology, climate change, physics, astronomy, and more. At federal, state, and local levels, policymakers should be investing more, not less, into our public school systems so that they can be the best possible versions of themselves.

In stark contrast, religious schools that teach creationism and related dogmas serve their students poorly in their ability to grasp the world around them. This also includes schools that refuse to teach sex education or teach that abstinence is the only proper form of safe sex. Not only do these institutions instill a restrictive, narrow worldview in their students, they practice what amounts to religious indoctrination and coercion.¹

Second, private, religious schools are not subject to the same legal requirements as public, state-operated schools, allowing them to discriminate on the basis of religious ideology.² For instance, the admissions practices of many religious institutions discriminate against LGBTQ students because their religious ideology teaches that these students live morally wrong and reprehensible lives. Additionally, private schools typically do not provide the same rights and protections to their student that public schools do – including those codified in Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

Public schools, on the other hand, serve the entire community, including the poor, the marginalized, racial and ethnic minorities, students with learning disabilities, and students who are English learners, and they do not discriminate against students on the basis of sexual orientation.

Third, school voucher programs have proven to be ripe for abuse time and time again. To cite just the most recent example, an investigation into the state of Oklahoma's private school voucher program revealed this month that roughly half a million dollars was misspent by families on noneducational items.³ This included Christmas trees, televisions, stereos, video game systems, outdoor grills, and more.⁴ Due to the lack of oversight and accountability, families in Oklahoma were able to use pandemic relief education funds on these and other noneducational items.

¹ *See, e.g.*, Rebecca Klein, "Voucher Schools Championed by Betsy DeVos Can Teach Whatever They Want. Turns Out They Teach Lies," *Huffington Post* (Dec. 7, 2017), available at: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/school-voucher-evangelical-education-betsy-devos_n_5a021962e4b04e96f0c6093c

² *See, e.g.*, Julie F. Mead and Suzanne E. Eckes, National Education Policy Center (NEPC), "How School Privatization Opens the Door for Discrimination" (Dec. 2018), available at: <https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/privatization>

³ Jennifer Palmer, Reese Gorman, and Clifton Adcock, "Stitt Gave Families \$8 Million for School Supplies in the Pandemic; They Bought Christmas Trees, Gaming Consoles and Hundreds of TVs," *Oklahoma Watch* (May 2, 2022), available at: <https://oklahomawatch.org/2022/05/02/stitt-gave-families-8-million-for-school-supplies-in-the-pandemic-they-bought-christmas-trees-gaming-consoles-and-hundreds-of-tvs>

⁴ *Id.*

Public schools are much more accountable to taxpayers and policymakers due to requirements relating to financial records. School voucher programs, conversely, are easy targets for fraud.

Even when they are not subject to such fraud and abuse, school voucher programs have the ultimate impact of diverting precious and much-needed resources from our nation's public schools—only to fund the education of a few, select students. For this and other reasons covered above, CFI urges the members of the Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties not to make recommendations relying on vouchers for private schools as part of this hearing.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,



Azhar Majeed
Director of Government Affairs
Center for Inquiry

cc:

Rep. Kweisi Mfume, House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Rep. Robin Kelly, House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Rep. Ayanna Pressley, House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Rep. Eleanor Norton, House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Rep. Rashida Tlaib, House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Rep. Danny Davis, House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Rep. Nancy Mace, House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Rep. Jim Jordan, House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Rep. Clay Higgins, House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Rep. Pete Sessions, House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Rep. Andy Biggs, House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Rep. Scott Franklin, House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Rep. Byron Donalds, House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties