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May 25, 2022

The Honorable Jamie Raskin, Chair
The Honorable Nancy Mace, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, U.S. House
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20514
Via email:

RE: House Oversight Committee Hearing “Free Speech Under Attack (Part II): Curriculum Sabotage and Classroom Censorship.”

Dear Chairman Raskin, Ranking Member Mace, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

I am honored to submit the following testimony warning against the use of school vouchers following the Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Subcommittee hearing on “Political Attacks on Free Speech and Classroom Censorship.” My name is Rabbi Jack Moline and I serve as president of Interfaith Alliance Foundation, a national nonpartisan organization that takes as our motto “protecting faith and freedom.” Since our inception in 1995, we have been devoted to championing true religious freedom for people of all faiths and none. We also work to secure the equal protection of all people from efforts to supersede civil rights under the guise of religious freedom.

Recent attacks on public education by the Religious Right are troubling to say the least. In supporting changes to school curriculums that ignore our history or deny the existence of people with different identities, the Right is using the classroom as a political battleground instead of putting the safety and well-being of students first. This is a topic that requires attention and thoughtful discussion but increasing our investment in vouchers is not the right path. We cannot mitigate one issue by funding another. Vouchers are a detriment to both public schools and, ultimately, the private, religious schools these programs support. To protect both public education and the constitutional separation between religion and government, it is essential that the subcommittee and Congress oppose any attempts to divert public dollars into private, religious schools.

Republican witness Ginny Gentles called for flexible education savings accounts to address the conflict over censoring school curriculums during last week’s hearing. This would blatantly fly in the face of religious freedom and take critical funding away from the institutions that commit to the singular goal of educating our children: public schools. To maintain the separation of religion and government, the government should not compel any citizen to furnish funds in support of a religion with which they may or may not agree. Many private, religious schools are unable or unwilling to separate the religious components of the education they offer in religious programs. For this reason, it is impossible to prevent a publicly funded voucher from being used to pay for explicitly religious activities.

Public schools serve students of all backgrounds and experiences and strive to create environments where no student feels unwelcome because of who they are, what they believe, or how they learn. But private schools are not held to the same standard. Even private schools with nondiscrimination policies may turn away students on the basis of religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, academic abilities, disciplinary history, disability, or ability to pay tuition. Public funds should support services that are open to all – not only the select few who meet a private school’s criteria. Diverting public dollars to private religious schools leaves fewer resources for schools that serve the majority of our nation’s students. The best way to ensure every child has access to a quality education is to use taxpayer resources to strengthen our public schools.

Religious education plays a meaningful role in the lives of many families. While parents have the right to choose a religious education, insisting it be paid for by voucher programs will ultimately harm the religious institutions they fund. Private religious schools that receive taxpayer funds should have to meet the same requirements as their public counterparts. By accepting vouchers, religious schools risk being mired in political debates, battles over-regulation and accountability, and disruptive inquiries into their standards and curricula.

Congregations and other religious organizations often see religious education as an extension of their ministry and are therefore unable or unwilling to separate religious components from their education. This inevitably leads to government funding of explicitly religious activities, in direct violation of the First Amendment. Allowing government funds to be used for religious purposes opens up private religious schools to government control and interference, which will inevitably dilute the religious missions of these institutions. Robust and comprehensive education for all is a positive value in the United States, creating a set of common values and civic knowledge. Public funds must come with public expectations and be invested in public schools to advance the mission of encouraging civic engagement and knowledge.

As Congress works to prevent interference and censorship in our public schools, I urge you to ensure federal funding supports public schools, not private schools. It is during this challenging time that the federal government should focus on providing more resources to our public schools and public school educators, which serve the vast majority of our nation’s students, particularly students from under-resourced communities and students of color, rather than siphoning limited resources to private schools. Preventing the assault on school curriculums cannot come at the cost of striving towards equal opportunity for all our nation’s children.

Sincerely,



Rabbi Jack Moline
President, Interfaith Alliance
Rabbi Emeritus, Agudas Achim Congregation
Alexandria, VA