

April 5, 2021

To members of the Senate Education Policy and Finance Committee,

Every Minnesota child, no matter what they look like, where they live, or who their parents are, deserves to attend a high-quality, welcoming school that is transparent and accountable to taxpayers. Senate File 960 would divert public dollars to private schools and would run counter to that goal. That is why educators, parents, school administrators and school board members across Minnesota oppose Senate File 960.

This bill has the potential to be the nation's largest school voucher proposal. It would allow any student — regardless of family income — to withdraw from public school and have their school funding be placed in a "savings account" to cover the expenses of a private education. Vouchers are unaccountable and have long been discredited as a way of raising student achievement.

We oppose Senate File 960 because the bill violates the spirit of public education in the following ways:

- Private schools do not offer equal access to all students. They are allowed to close their doors to children for many reasons, including the faith followed by the student's family, the student's special needs, race, immigration status or sexual orientation. A 2017 investigation by ChalkBeat, a nonprofit news website that covers education, found that roughly one in 10 of Indiana's voucher schools publicly shared a policy suggesting or declaring that LGBTQ students are not welcome. (<https://www.chalkbeat.org/2017/8/10/21107318/choice-for-most-in-nation-s-largest-voucher-program-16-million-went-to-schools-with-anti-lgbt-polic/>)
- Private schools are not accountable to citizens or state policymakers. They operate with little oversight, few financial or academic reporting requirements, lower standards for teachers and no accountability for poor results. In Arizona, the state's auditor general found \$700,000 of voucher dollars were spent inappropriately. The audit showed lax financial oversight and a failure to flag accounts at high risk for fraud. (<https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/arizona/2018/10/29/misspent-school-voucher-funds-exceed-700-k-little-recovered/1780495002/>)
- The evidence is clear that vouchers don't improve educational outcomes for students. In Louisiana, vouchers didn't boost college enrollment and math scores. In fact, the scores of students in voucher programs were lower than their peers in public schools. (<https://www.chalkbeat.org/2019/4/23/21055489/do-voucher-students-scores-bounce-back-after-initial-declines-new-research-says-no>)

This bill represents a significant step backward. It leaves participating students particularly vulnerable to arbitrary or discriminatory dismissals because they will have foresworn their right to attend public schools. A likely outcome of this bill is some students will have no options for primary or secondary education at all. It cannot be seriously argued that this will improve student outcomes by any metric.

There are many challenges facing the students in Minnesota's public schools, including persistent opportunity gaps, racial inequities and a shortage of trained teachers. Rather than subsidizing nonpublic schools, state policymakers should focus on adequately funding our public schools. Minnesota's Constitution makes it the Legislature's duty to establish a general and uniform system of public schools. By many measures, the state is not meeting that obligation:

- Between 2003 and 2020, the basic formula has lost considerable ground to inflation. The formula would be \$503 per pupil higher in the current year if it had simply kept pace with inflation.
- The Minnesota Department of Education estimates that the special education cross-subsidy in the current school year is almost \$700 million. This means that school districts are diverting close to \$700 million in general education funding to cover the shortfall in special education funding. This bill would only worsen that picture by diverting even more funding away from general education services.

- Similarly, in the 2019-20 school year, Minnesota school districts spent more than \$142 million on services for English learners but received just \$47 million in funding. Again, school districts redirected more than \$95 million in general education revenue to provide important services to English learners.
- The state provides no additional support to the 300 school sites identified for support under our ESSA accountability system. The Minnesota Department of Education's School Finance Working Group, which included Senators Nelson and Wiger, voted to invest \$90 million in data-driven full-service community schools, which provide wrap-around services to their students like food shelves, dental care and housing services, because our students don't learn if they're not fed, in pain or unsheltered.

This legislation likely violates the uniform education. We need to work together to find real solutions to strengthen our public schools. That requires real investments in a public education system that works for everyone. Senate File 960 does not help Minnesota get there.

Sincerely,

