

The National Coalition *for* Public Education

February 11, 2003

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

The undersigned members of the National Coalition for Public Education oppose both the tax subsidy for private and religious school tuition and the voucher demonstration project that are included in the Administration's budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2004, and urge you to oppose any legislation that includes either of these provisions, which do nothing to improve public education.

Voucher Demonstration Program

The Administration proposes a "Choice Incentive Fund," which would award \$75 million for voucher programs in states and cities. It reserves an unspecified portion of these funds for a voucher program in the District of Columbia. In making its case for this program, the Department of Education quotes out of context one finding of a study by the General Accounting Office on privately funded voucher programs: such programs in Dayton, Ohio; Washington, D.C.; and New York City "provide some evidence that African American students who used vouchers to attend private schools showed greater improvements in math and reading than students in the comparison group." The Department overlooked other findings in the same report, including these:

Voucher users in Dayton, Ohio "showed no significant improvements in reading or math test scores;"

Positive effects for African American students in the District of Columbia in the second year of the study "disappeared in the third and final year of the study;" "No significant differences were found in any of the studies for students in other ethnic or racial categories;" and

The studied programs "were relatively small in scale, therefore, the findings cannot be generalized beyond the specific programs and geographic areas where they were conducted." ¹

The Department of Education also overlooked the GAO report on publicly funded programs in Cleveland and Milwaukee, which revealed that the official evaluations in those cities "found little or no difference in voucher and public school students' performance."² Given the Administration's commitment to

funding only programs whose effectiveness is proven by scientifically based research, its continued support for vouchers defies explanation.

The Administration's decision to promote a voucher demonstration project also overlooked:

The will of Congress, which rejected, by strong bipartisan margins in both chambers, proposals to fund a voucher demonstration project, and declined to include funding in the pending appropriations for FY03 for a voucher demonstration project proposed by the Administration; and

The priorities of the American people, who have repeatedly rejected vouchers in polls and at the ballot box. In the District of Columbia, for example, a recent poll determined that 76 percent of voters oppose taxpayer-funded vouchers if they mean less money for public school students, with only 17 percent favoring such a diversion of public funds. In California and Michigan, voters rejected vouchers by two-to-one margins in November 2000.

Part of the reason Congress and the public have rejected vouchers is because they undermine accountability, a cornerstone of the reforms enacted in the No Child Left Behind Act. Private schools are not required to:

Make meetings, dropout rates, test scores, and other information open and available to the public.

Comply with all civil rights, health and safety requirements.

Teach according to state academic standards.

Administer assessments aligned to those standards.

Publicize test scores or their annual progress towards proficiency goals.

Any voucher program that maintained these dual standards would therefore undermine the accountability the Administration and both parties worked so hard to enact.

The "Alternative to Failing School" Tax Credit

The budget proposal also includes a refundable tax credit that would cover half of the first \$5000 a family incurred for private school tuition, fees and transportation. Because it is refundable, families could receive a government check to help pay private school tuition, rendering this proposal no different than a voucher.

Furthermore, the tax credit would reduce federal revenue by approximately \$3.3 billion over five years, diverting funds that might otherwise be available for proven education programs that the same budget proposes to level fund or cut. For example:

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers program is cut by 40 percent, even though the program is able to fund only a fraction of the grant applications received, and has contributed to significant improvements in parent involvement and the academic performance of program participants.

English language acquisition is level funded for the second consecutive year, even though students with limited English proficiency will be expected to be sufficiently fluent within three years to take state assessments in English.

Teacher quality state grants are level funded for the second consecutive year, even though the No Child Left Behind Act requires a highly qualified teacher in every classroom, states are experiencing difficulties fulfilling this requirement, and this grant would help states and districts implement research-based strategies to improve teacher quality.

The budget eliminates funding entirely for 45 programs, including comprehensive school reform, school counseling, smaller learning communities, and drop-out prevention.

Neither vouchers nor the proposed tax credit would expand parents' educational options, since private schools may not be required to accept all applicants. Neither a voucher nor a tax credit would guarantee any student admission to the private school of his or her "choice." Those most at risk of being left behind are ironically those most in need of educational support – students with learning, behavioral, or physical disabilities, English language learners, and children from unstable homes.

Furthermore, in order to make an informed decision regarding the ability of a school to meet their child's needs, it is important for parents to have as much information as possible. Public schools must issue report cards detailing school and student performance on state assessments, graduation rates, and teacher qualifications, among other things. Private schools are not required to reveal such information.

Parents of children in schools needing improvement already have options. The No Child Left Behind Act provides for public school choice, as well as federally funded after-school tutoring services for low-income low-performing students in schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress. The law also increases funding for charter schools. The proposed tuition tax credit is therefore not only bad policy, but unnecessary.

Public schools enroll 90 percent of our children. Vouchers and tuition tax credits divert resources from schools that are already severely underfunded to help a select few, abandoning the majority of students left behind. Such schemes cannot improve public schools. We urge you to oppose any legislation that incorporates either of these proposals.

Sincerely,

American Association of School Administrators
American Association of University Women

American Civil Liberties Union
Americans for Democratic Action
American Federation of State,
County and Municipal Employees
American Federation of Teachers
American Humanist Association
American Jewish Committee
American Jewish Congress
Americans for Religious Liberty
Americans United for the Separation
of Church and State
Anti-Defamation League
Association of Educational Service
Agencies
Association for Supervision &
Curriculum Development
Central Conference of American
Rabbis
Council of Chief State School
Officers
Council for Exceptional Children
Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education
Network (GLSEN)
General Board of Church and
Society of The United Methodist
Church
Hadassah, the Women's Zionist
Organization of America
International Reading Association
International Union, United Auto
Workers
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
Labor Council for Latin American
Advancement
Leadership Conference on Civil
Rights
NA'AMAT USA
National Alliance of Black School
Educators
National Association of Elementary
School Principals
National Association of Federal
Education Program Administrators
National Association of School
Psychologists

National Association of State
Directors of Special Education
National Black Child Development
Institute
National Council of Jewish Women
National Education Association
National PTA
National Rural Education Association
National School Boards Association
National Urban League
PEARL
People For the American Way
Presbyterian Church USA,
Washington Office
School Social Work Association of
America
Service Employees International
Union (SEIU)
Unitarian Universalist Association of
Congregations
Union of American Hebrew
Congregations

United Church of Christ Justice and
Witness Ministries
Women of Reform Judaism