

## OPPOSE HB 1 & SB 1172

# An empty promise to Florida students

HB 1 and SB 1172 will purportedly provide safe learning environments for victims of bullying. The reality is that this legislation would use private school vouchers to push bullied students into private and religious schools where they will have fewer protections. The legislation will also leave most of Florida's children behind,<sup>1</sup> and funnel enormous amounts of taxpayer money into a troubled system with few safeguards. We know how to make Florida's public schools safe, welcoming and inclusive for all, and it is not through this private school voucher program.

### THE PROBLEM

#### **Sending vulnerable children to private schools won't solve the problem**

- Students accepting private school vouchers forfeit many of their civil rights protections. The laws that safeguard children from many forms of discrimination—including bullying and harassment—in public schools *do not apply* in private or religious schools.
- This legislation does not require the recipient private schools to do *anything* to protect transferring victims. It also does nothing to protect students if they are then bullied in these schools.
- Investigations into Florida private schools receiving taxpayer dollars through vouchers found that, in some places, taxpayers are subsidizing curricula that teach hate and extremism.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Private school vouchers do not put the needs of children first**

- Florida's private school voucher programs fail to meet the standards we expect for publicly funded programs serving students.<sup>3</sup> For example, one of Florida's existing voucher programs does not publicly report any data on student testing.<sup>4</sup> Another program requires no testing at all.<sup>5</sup>
- This legislation fails the basic test of how to address bullying and harassment in school. Instead of getting to the root of the problem, this legislation tells bullies that they can drive their victims out of school. Victims learn that they must run away to be safe.
- Student outcomes are not better in private schools—they're often worse.<sup>6</sup> Research shows that, after accounting for demographics and income, student achievement gains in *public* school are at least as good or better.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Existing private school voucher programs fail taxpayers, risk fraud**

- Under Florida law, students can take taxpayer money from public schools to attend private schools that are not accredited, where teachers lack a college degree, and where there is no requirement for a basic annual audit to determine how tax dollars are used.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Almost 9 in 10 children in Florida attend public schools. FLDOE 2016-2017 data, available at: <http://bit.ly/2pMnVcm>

<sup>2</sup><http://bit.ly/2jqtyqY>

<sup>3</sup><http://bit.ly/2C5T5RP>

<sup>4</sup>*Id.* at 12.

<sup>5</sup>*Id.*

<sup>6</sup>Christopher A. and Sarah Theule Lubienski, *The Public School Advantage*, University of Chicago Press (2013).

<sup>7</sup>*Id.*

<sup>8</sup><http://bit.ly/2zjAg7F>, <http://bit.ly/2m3mm4l>

➤ Florida already sends nearly \$1 billion to private schools through four existing voucher programs.<sup>9</sup> At least \$50 million was lost to fraud through just one of the private school voucher programs, the McKay Scholarship.<sup>10</sup>

➤ Private school vouchers require taxpayers to fund two school systems, even when our public schools are already underfunded. In 2017-18, Florida will spend \$7,296 per pupil—less than it spent a decade ago when adjusted for inflation.<sup>11</sup> It is also \$3,000 less per pupil than the national average.<sup>12</sup>

## THE SOLUTION

### Build safe, welcoming and inclusive public schools

➤ Decades of research shows that developing support systems, providing allies and role models, employing inclusive and respectful curricula, and taking a close look at harassment policies can prevent bullying. If legislators want to protect *all* of Florida’s children, they should invest in such proven strategies.<sup>13</sup>

➤ Everyone in a school—administrators, teachers, cafeteria staff, bus drivers, assistants, substitute teachers, parents/guardians and students—should have the training and tools to create an anti-bullying climate.

### Taxpayer money should be used to fund only public schools

➤ We should invest in the schools where most of Florida’s children are educated—public schools. Those investments should focus on reducing class sizes, improving teacher training and recruitment, and increasing parental involvement. And we should use free/low-cost resources from the federal government<sup>14</sup> and other sources<sup>15</sup> designed to help students grow and thrive.

➤ Florida should invest more in existing programs that combat bullying,<sup>16</sup> including the Teen Outreach Program, the state’s Sexual Violence Prevention Program and other programs led by the Office of Safe Schools.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>9</sup><http://bit.ly/2zjAg7F>

<sup>10</sup><http://bit.ly/2m3mm4l>

<sup>11</sup><http://bit.ly/2pNSYjs>

<sup>12</sup><http://wapo.st/2BO1BAJ>

<sup>13</sup><http://bit.ly/2BSjsGU>

<sup>14</sup><http://bit.ly/2DsrYfT>, <http://www.idra.org/>

<sup>15</sup><http://bit.ly/2BSjsGU>

<sup>16</sup><http://bit.ly/2E9EO3W>

<sup>17</sup><http://bit.ly/1W9qKxz>