



May 9, 2019

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor, State of Florida
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

VIA US MAIL AND EMAIL

Dear Governor DeSantis:

We write to urge you to support Florida’s public schools and the nearly three million children they serve, and veto S.B. 7070. Florida already diverts nearly \$1 billion of scarce public funds to private schools each year through several different voucher programs. S.B. 7070 threatens an unprecedented expansion of private school vouchers in Florida at a time when the state has fallen from 24th in per pupil funding levels to the bottom ten out of all states.¹ Florida cannot afford to let S.B. 7070 become law.

The costly experiment of private school vouchers has not been successful. Several recent studies show the negative achievement effects of private school voucher programs across the country, including in Indiana, Washington, D.C., and Louisiana.² The latest study finds that after four years of the Louisiana Scholarship Program (LSP), a publicly funded private school voucher program, students using these vouchers experienced “large negative effects,” especially in math.³

Florida’s existing private school voucher programs have raised other issues that S.B. 7070 does not remedy. Private schools participating in Florida’s voucher programs are not held to the same standards, educational or otherwise, as public schools. This has resulted in Florida private schools that have falsified health and safety records, and hired staff who didn’t meet background check requirements.⁴ It also has resulted in students losing important protections that public schools are required to uphold. Students with disabilities who are in private school through voucher programs lose key federal rights, including access to necessary special education services and certified teachers. A recent U.S. Government Accountability Office report found that voucher programs, including in Florida, often do not tell parents about the loss of these rights when parents move a child with a disability from a public to a private school.⁵

¹ See <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BTAjZuqOs8pEGWW6oUBotb6omVw1hUJI/view>

² See, e.g., <https://www.epi.org/publication/school-vouchers-are-not-a-proven-strategy-for-improving-student-achievement/>

³ <https://www.wvno.org/post/study-shows-louisiana-school-voucher-program-hurt-math-scores>

⁴ <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/11/15/there-is-no-oversight-private-school-vouchers-can.html>

⁵ <https://www.gao.gov/assets/690/688444.pdf>

Private schools also pick and choose the students they admit. They do not have to provide transportation, free or reduced lunch, or other services to their students. Some of them teach hateful, extremist content, including that being gay is “an abomination.”⁶ Florida public schools must serve all children, must transport them and provide them with free and reduced lunch and all manner of other services, and do so in a nondiscriminatory way, even with the limited resources the Legislature has provided. A majority of public school students in Florida are lower income, and many need extra supports in school to grow and thrive. Yet we are investing in unproven private school vouchers, not in evidence-based measures, like small class sizes, to ensure all students have the opportunity to learn and be successful. Lower income districts in Florida have 25 percent fewer teachers per every 100 students than higher income districts in the state. Instead of helping close this opportunity gap in our public schools, S.B. 7070 would expand private school vouchers, leaving the vast majority of Florida’s schoolchildren behind.

Florida’s public schools would be further decimated by the drastic so-called “Schools of Hope” charter school expansion in S.B. 7070, which would increase the number of communities eligible for funding to establish charter schools under this program by several times. With each student who leaves their neighborhood school for a charter school, their pro-rated share of funding leaves with them, while the district remains responsible for many costs that those funds had supported.⁷

By contrast, establishing the community schools grant program in this bill is a positive step towards an evidence-based, holistic approach to education. This proven model⁸ provides for collaborative governance with schools and communities, and wrap-around supports like health care, counseling, after-school programs and other neighborhood services. This would be a positive investment for students across the state. But instead of focusing on proven solutions, S.B. 7070 sets up dueling systems, where community schools would compete with private school vouchers and charter schools for resources—and lose. Instead of the costly and unproven Schools of Hope experiment, Florida should expand the community schools program.

Every child in Florida deserves a thriving public school in their community. By vetoing S.B. 7070, you will be supporting the nearly three million children in Florida “waitlisted” for fully funded public schools.

Sincerely,

**Zoe M.
Savitsky**

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⁶ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/florida-anti-bullying-gay-students_n_5b69d2b2e4b0de86f4a5edcf

⁷ See, e.g.: https://www.inthepublicinterest.org/wp-content/uploads/ITPI_Breaking_Point_May2018FINAL.pdf

⁸ See, e.g.: https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Community_Schools_Evidence_Based_Strategy_BRIEF.pdf