



April 27, 2022

Pennsylvania House of Representatives  
Re: House Bill 2169

Dear Representative:

***Only 29% of Pennsylvania parents with a child in a K-12 school in a recent poll said that they supported providing children in struggling schools with a voucher so they could attend a different school as opposed to providing struggling schools with additional resources and supports to help all students. Polling was conducted by Cygnal, Inc. of Washington, D.C.***

Not only do PSBA's 4,500 locally elected school board members overwhelmingly oppose House Bill 2169, but it is also evident that parents in the Commonwealth do not support the concept advanced in House Bill 2169. **For that reason, and those outlined below, we are requesting your opposition to House Bill 2169** that will cost poor, struggling schools almost \$170 million.

The "Lifeline Scholarships" created in House Bill 2169 are just the latest iteration of school vouchers that will siphon precious taxpayer resources away from public schools, and send those resources to private schools, higher education institutions and entities that are not accountable to the public for their decisions or results. The legislation would lessen educational opportunities for students, while leading to funding cuts and higher local property taxes. The problems with the bill far outweigh the attempts to address various areas for meaningful change for students, and taxpayers cannot afford to fund both private and public schools.

State funding intended for public schools would be diverted away from those schools in order to fund the newly created vouchers. Many of the lowest-performing schools which HB 2169 intends to target are already struggling financially and simply cannot afford to receive less resources. Creating a separate education system does nothing to address inadequacies or issues with the existing public school system. Further, by targeting the lowest performing 15% of public schools this voucher program is duplicating the efforts of the existing Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit Program which provides scholarships for students in the same schools. The practical impact of HB 2169 would be to take scarce resources from struggling public schools that serve all students in order to subsidize the private school tuition for a few students.

The fact is that some voucher families lose when they enroll their children in private schools. The legal requirements applicable to private schools are fundamentally different than those for public schools. This is especially true regarding the rights of students with disabilities

because private schools are not subject to federal special education law and can deny services to students. Ironically, the bill requires special education dollars to be included in the voucher for students with disabilities. The bill further expressly prohibits the commonwealth or its agencies from regulating participating entities – including a nonpublic school. This effectively means the state would be prohibited from requiring a nonpublic school enrolling voucher recipients to comply with IDEA or state regulations governing special education even though additional resources would be allocated under the proposed voucher program to provide educational supports and services to students with disabilities.

Vouchers will create greater fiscal distress and budgeting problems for school districts. With very late deadlines for applications and even more time before notifications to school districts about students who will participate in the program, it will be next to impossible for school districts to prepare for the impacts on their budgets. In addition, vouchers divert resources from public education but do not reduce costs. When a student leaves a school district to enroll in a nonpublic school, the district's costs associated with that student do not just disappear (costs such as building operations and maintenance, utilities, technology, food service, staff salaries and benefits, etc.).

House Bill 2169 does not provide real accountability. The few provisions intended to provide some accountability, both academically and financially, are shallow, inconsistent and vague. The bill contains minimal financial accountability provisions to prevent fraud and abuse of the system, only requiring random audits of voucher accounts. Further, the bill does not require students to take state academic assessments, or even alternative assessments, and there is no required student performance data reporting which would allow objective evaluation of the success of the program. In fact, the only "academic accountability" requirement is a parent satisfaction survey.

Even after years of debates on property taxes and pensions, HB 2169 would further erode local taxpayer relief and ultimately the state's pension reimbursement to districts by including those payments in the voucher calculation. It is also interesting that the special education funding formula weights are good enough for the calculation of a tuition voucher, but somehow continue to be problematic in applying them to ALL public schools (i.e., charter and cyber charter schools).

Last, we should learn from the experience of other states in creating voucher programs that are full of fraud. An Arizona evaluation of its education savings account program found that parents have used voucher debit cards on unauthorized purchases, including a new television. One parent enrolled their child in a public school and simply accepted the money from the voucher debit card. Another parent used their debit card to pay for a child that did not even reside in Arizona. In both Wisconsin and Florida, employees of nonpublic school entities have been found to misappropriate voucher funds with the purchase of luxury vehicles and a complicated money laundering scheme.

We thank you for your time and consideration of this issue and we urge you to reject HB 2169.