

Testimony of Joy Authur  
People For the American Way  
Texas Senate  
Education Committee  
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Madam Chair Shapiro, Vice Chair Janek and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Joy Authur and I am with People For the American Way. People For the American Way is a national nonprofit civil rights and civic engagement organization with more than one million members and supporters nationally, including 41,000 in Texas, and with more than 25 years of commitment to protecting and promoting the civil rights and liberties of all Americans. Since our founding, People For the American Way (PFAW) has recognized that public education is crucial to a healthy democracy. We work to promote a quality public education system and protect it from those who seek to divert public money to private and religious schools which will not serve the majority of school students and are not held accountable in the same ways as public schools for their use of public funds.

Since our founding, People For the American Way has opposed publicly funded private school vouchers. Vouchers are advertised as a way to “save” children from a broken public education system, but in fact they only contribute to the challenges public school students face. The ideology that has pushed vouchers in this country is fundamentally incompatible with the belief that all children, not just some, have a right to an excellent public school education. In the face of strong public opposition to vouchers, proponents of school privatization have adopted a new strategy using the needs of autistic children to accomplish the same old goals: the diversion

There are several fatal flaws with SB 1000 which provide private school vouchers for autistic children:

This voucher program will not benefit working class and rural families. The money that this voucher provides for paying tuition, will not cover the entire cost required to educate the child. Only those families that can afford to pay for the additional cost that their child needs will be able to benefit. Families that can't pay the incremental cost to send their children to school will find themselves in the same public school, but now a public school which has fewer resources available to it.

Rural families will also be at a great disadvantage. Since this voucher bill doesn't cover transportation to and from school -- which is currently provided by public schools -- rural parents could be forced to choose between driving their child to a school many miles from their home or missing out on a school altogether. Families in urban areas may be able to provide transportation without too much trouble, but families in rural Texas counties will face a tremendous burden.

Additionally, this voucher program will force Texas taxpayers to fund private schools that are not required to comply with federal civil rights laws (including non-discrimination statutes), nor abide by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act protections that attach to these federal funds. Hence, taxpayers could be financing not only religious, racial and gender discrimination, but even disability discrimination.

interested in helping children with autism, and not in pushing a program designed to drain public money from public schools, it has many other options.

Whatever your thoughts on the best manner to improve schools, it's clear that these vouchers are not a good use of taxpayer dollars. We owe it to all of our state's children to look for better solutions to the problems our schools face.