

Christian Life Commission Baptist General Convention of Texas

Private school vouchers are an important Church-state issue. The fundamental principle influencing our opposition to school vouchers is that tax dollars should not be used to finance the teaching of religion.

The Texas Constitution begins with a Bill of Rights. Sections 4,5,6, & 7 address the importance of religious liberty as a foundation in the state of Texas. Section 7 explicitly prohibits financing religious education with state appropriations:

Article 1 - BILL OF RIGHTS

Section 7 - APPROPRIATIONS FOR SECTARIAN PURPOSES

No money shall be appropriated, or drawn from the Treasury for the benefit of any sect, or religious society, theological or religious seminary; nor shall property belonging to the State be appropriated for any such purposes.

We believe that religious teaching flourishes when it is not beholden to state support. We support the Bill of Rights of the Texas Constitution opposing vouchers that appropriate tax money to sectarian education.

Vouchers are tempting to many, but tax payer money comes with strings attached. Tax dollars should come with strings attached because, tax payers dollars are a tool of accountability and regulation for the state. Religious schools who take advantage of vouchers will have to deal with invasive state regulation.

There are many thriving religiously-affiliated schools. They have at the core of their identity religious teachings and values. It is very important to protect the sanctity of religious content in religiously affiliated schools. State money to religious schools creates a climate of compromise. Government regulation of religious schools will increase, changing the way in which they provide education. Political demands for accountability in performance will reach those schools previously unencumbered by such standards.

Vouchers - put religious freedom at risk because it will use my tax dollar to fund your religion. State money will be used to pay for religious instruction. SB 1506 provides no "opt-out" clause. If a qualifying school's admission policy is that students are required to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ; if the curriculum requires students to take religion classes or attend religious services, then those policies stand. A parent must be advised of a school's policy when

Vouchers– Public to public, before public to private. Any voucher program should pay first for the transfer of any child to any other public school regardless of district lines. This is included as an option in SB 1506, and should be tried as a public to public transfer program before private school vouchers are introduced.

In the qualifying urban areas listed in SB 1506, Texas has “balkanized” school districts – multiple districts clustered in metropolitan areas. Any experimentation or pilot programs should be thoroughly tried in the public arena (as Charter schools have been) before shifting public tax dollars out to private, non-regulated schools. The vast majority of private schools are religious in nature. If your child is able to take a voucher to a religious school but not to a neighboring school district, then the religious school is being favored.

Vouchers set up a dual set of admissions – Public schools must accept all students. This is not the case for private schools. This bill allows existing admission requirements of private and religious schools to remain in tact as a filter before they accept the voucher child. Many religious schools limit admission on the basis of religious confessions of the children and/the parent, religious practices and preferences, by using behavior standards or by using IQ standards or other tests for admission. SB 1506, sec. 29.357 states that qualifying schools must comply with federal non-discrimination laws in only 3 areas (race, ethnicity, and origin) but these tests on nondiscrimination are applied after students have ALREADY been judged to meet more restrictive admission requirements. The strongest choice in this bill is the choice of the admission committee of a private school.

We are comfortable with religious preferences and confessions as a qualification for admission to private schools when funding is by individual gifts and donation. We are not comfortable with the criteria of religious preference, IQ, and test scores being a discriminating factor when school funding is tax payer money. Public schools are not allowed to set admissions tests or otherwise chose students for admission to the school.

Vouchers - put religious pluralism at risk because it will force the government (comptroller) to decide between good and bad religious schools. SB 1506 says clearly, that qualifying schools “must not advocate or foster unlawful behavior or teach hatred of any person or on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin or religion.”

There is NO guarantee that religious schools will want to accept vouchers or keep them when the regulations of government infringe on the religious nature and teachings of the school. As schools choose to participate in the program, the religious teachings of participating schools will come under public scrutiny, increasing the risk of sectarian strife. Are some schools considered “too religious” for inclusion? Are some considered a “dangerous” religion? Too liberal? Too foreign? Too new age? Too fundamentalist?

Who decides if the teachings of the school meet the criteria? The Texas Private School Accreditation Commission referenced in the bill as the listing agent for eligible accrediting bodies, is a organization that oversees the processes of accreditation. There are many accrediting bodies, but no comparable requirements prohibiting bias, nor a uniform qualification for the accrediting bodies to conform to all of the curriculum expectations of the State of Texas.

Vouchers – put restrictions on curriculum and accountability for religious schools by setting up dual systems of accountability and reporting.

Voucher students are set up to be vulnerable to a double standard of curriculum and accountability in private/religious schools because the voucher students are required to take tests and have their scores reported in ways that are not required of other students in the private/religious schools. SB 1506 voucher programs dictate to religious schools that they must

--Administer to voucher students, in the spring, either the prescribed state test or a nationally norm referenced test that is approved by the state (such as Iowa, Stanford, or others). This is not required of other students in the private/religious school. Also the performance of the voucher students is computed and shared in ways that the other students within the qualifying school are not subject to:

These voucher programs dictate to religious schools that they release the voucher student's individual test scores to the parents, and the aggregate results to the public (through the Resource Center), and to researchers designated by the state. This is not required of the other students in the private religious school.

Church State issues require tough decisions. Our forebearers have reasoned carefully where these issues are involved. General principles have to be applied in fact-sensitive cases. The fundamental principle influencing our opposition to school vouchers is that tax dollars should not be used to finance the teaching of religion, this is advancement of religion pure and simple.

Vouchers have always caused controversy in debates about public education. There is certainly no national consensus that they lead to higher academic achievement or are more cost-effective than public schools.

Texas schools need funding and excellence. Vouchers are a diversion from the primary responsibility of Texas legislature to provide a vital and effective public education system.

Susan (Suzii) Paynter