

February 8, 2021

To: The Hon. Doug Broxson, Chair of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Education & All Committee Members  
Florida Senate  
201 The Capitol  
404 South Monroe St.  
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1100

*Re: SB 48 Opposition*

Dear Chair Broxson & Honorable Members of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Education:

We, the diverse group of undersigned organizations, write to urge you to support Florida's public schools and the nearly three million children they serve, and reject S.B. 48. Florida already diverts approximately \$1 billion of scarce public funds to private schools each year through its voucher programs. S.B. 48 threatens an unprecedented expansion of private school vouchers in Florida. This proposal to dramatically increase Florida's public funds diverted to private schools follows a harsh decade over which the state reduced its public education funding effort by 30 percent from 2008 to 2018.<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated just how harmful these cuts to public schools are for Florida's students. Our public schools are struggling with limited resources to meet the academic, health and safety, and social and emotional needs of the majority of Florida's children, who rely on these schools to learn, grow, and thrive. Florida cannot afford to let S.B. 48 become law.

We have serious concerns about S.B. 48, which would merge Florida's existing private school voucher programs into two Education Savings Account vouchers, vastly expanding the uses for these public funds, paving the way for a new privatized industry of education services providers with minimal standards, and increasing the growth of the program year after year.

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.<sup>2</sup> And Florida's existing private school voucher programs have raised other issues that S.B. 48 does not remedy – in fact, S.B. 48 *reduces* accountability of these programs by decreasing the frequency of audits. 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.<sup>3</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> See [https://edlawcenter.org/assets/\\$600%20Billion/\\$600%20Billion%20Lost.pdf](https://edlawcenter.org/assets/$600%20Billion/$600%20Billion%20Lost.pdf)

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

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/11/15/there-is-no-oversight-private-school-vouchers-can.html>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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.”<sup>5</sup> Florida public schools must serve all children, most 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. 48 would expand private school vouchers, leaving the vast majority of Florida’s schoolchildren behind.

Florida should focus its resources on funding proven models, like community schools,<sup>6</sup> which provide 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. 48 sets up dueling systems, where community schools would compete with private school vouchers for resources—and lose. Instead of the costly and unproven voucher experiment, Florida should expand the community schools program.

Every child in Florida deserves a thriving public school in their community. By rejecting S.B. 48, you will be supporting the nearly three million children in Florida “waitlisted” for fully funded public schools. We appreciate the opportunity to work with you to achieve this goal in support of Florida’s students and families.

Sincerely,

Americans United for the Separation of Church and State  
Equality Florida  
Florida Council of Churches  
NAACP Florida State Conference  
Pastors for Florida’s Children  
Public Funds Public Schools  
Southern Education Foundation  
SPLC Action Fund

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gao.gov/assets/690/688444.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/florida-anti-bullying-gay-students\\_n\\_5b69d2b2e4b0de86f4a5edcf](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/florida-anti-bullying-gay-students_n_5b69d2b2e4b0de86f4a5edcf)

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g.: [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Community\\_Schools\\_Evidence\\_Based\\_Strategy\\_BRIEF.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Community_Schools_Evidence_Based_Strategy_BRIEF.pdf)