



Georgia House Committee on Education
508-D Coverdell Legislative Office Bldg.
Atlanta, GA 30334

February 8, 2021

Dear Members of the Georgia House Committee on Education:

The undersigned civil rights and education advocacy organizations in Georgia respectfully write to express our serious concerns with HB60, the proposed Georgia Educational Scholarship Act. We believe that authorizing a program that would divert taxpayer dollars away from our state's public schools and toward private schools, especially after the Governor has proposed a budget that would underfund the Quality Basic Education Act for 18 of the last 20 years, represents a violation of Georgia's constitutional mandate to fund education adequately and with a high level of priority. Article VIII, Section I of the Georgia State Constitution states, "The provision of an adequate public education for the citizens shall be a primary obligation of the State of Georgia."¹ Yet, by positioning the state to spend hundreds of millions of dollars in taxpayer funds and school districts to lose as much in per-pupil funding for public schools, HB60 perpetuates unequal opportunities for the state's public school students while advancing a proposal that has no evidence of improving academic achievement. Specifically, we urge you to reconsider HB60 for the following reasons:

1. HB60 diverts precious resources away from public school systems in need, leaving many of Georgia's most vulnerable student populations with diminished educational opportunities.

As you know, the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic have reached far and wide in our state. Students in rural and urban communities alike continue to lack reliable access to high-speed internet and devices. Overall, 25 percent of Georgia's households lack high-speed home internet; among families making under \$25,000 annually, 47 percent lack high-speed home internet. Conversely, only 8 percent of families making over \$150,000 per year lack access to high-speed home internet in Georgia.² Forty-four percent of households in rural Georgia are without high-speed home internet, while 21 percent of families living in metropolitan areas lack

¹ "Constitution of the State of Georgia." Georgia State Senate.
<http://www.senate.ga.gov/Documents/gaconstitution.pdf>.

² "Students of Color Caught in the Homework Gap." Future Ready, 2020. <https://futureready.org/homework-gap/>.

access. Analysis by the Southern Education Foundation (SEF) of 2018 American Community Survey data reveals that providing a high-speed internet hotspot and a device to each student in Georgia who lacks one would cost the state over \$180 million.³

Our public schools need additional support, but the passage of HB60 would do the opposite. HB60 would *penalize* school districts for not offering full-time in-person learning by providing families with vouchers for private educational alternatives that would strip public school districts of state funds on a per-student basis,⁴ while private schools that keep their doors closed do not face consequences. If passed, HB60's redirection of state funds would begin this year. Even if the Governor's FY2022 budget passes, public schools will still face a \$400 million cut next year. An enrollment cap of 8,432 students, or 0.5 percent of the state's total public school enrollment of 1,686,318 students for the 2020-21 school year, would mean that the voucher program would cost the state **\$44.8 million** for the 2021-22 school year and, using 2020-21 enrollment and per-pupil expenditure figures, **\$448 million annually** once its 5 percent enrollment cap is reached in the 2030-31 school year. Adding these amounts to the nearly \$100 million the state already spends on private school choice programs annually⁵ paints a picture of misguided priorities for our state – particularly as deep cuts to QBE loom.

2. HB60 funds an educational model with no proven track record of academic success or improved outcomes for participating students.

A comprehensive review of school voucher programs concluded that no clear advantage exists for students attending private schools with vouchers. In fact, in some states, participation in voucher programs had negative effects on student achievement, with students enrolled in the Louisiana Scholarship Program increasing their chances of failing math by 50 percent⁶ and students in Indiana using vouchers to attend private schools consistently scoring lower on reading and math tests than their public school peers.⁷ A study of the Opportunity Scholarship Program, Washington, D.C.'s school voucher policy, found negative impacts on student academic achievement after one year of participating in the program.⁸ In their short lifespans to date, private school voucher programs have failed to produce results and, in many cases, widened long-standing opportunity and achievement gaps between different groups of students. Georgia's own existing voucher programs do not publicly report students' academic performance; a new voucher program does not make sense when the effectiveness of existing programs in the state is unknown.

³ SEF internal analysis; estimate based on [Census ACS data](#) and assumes a cost of \$500 per student.

⁴ "HB60 - Georgia Educational Scholarship Act, Enact." Georgia General Assembly, January 12, 2021. <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/58867>.

⁵ Owens, Stephen J. "State of Education Funding (2021)." Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, January 2021. <https://gbpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20210108-stateofedfunding.pdf>.

⁶ Abdulkadiroğlu, Atila, Parag A. Pathak, and Christopher R. Walters. "Free to Choose: Can School Choice Reduce Student Achievement?" *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 10, no. 1 (2018): 175–206. <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20160634>.

⁷ Dynarski, Mark. "On Negative Effects of Vouchers." Brookings.edu. The Brookings Institution, July 12, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/on-negative-effects-of-vouchers/>.

⁸ Dynarski, Mark, Ning Rui, Ann Webber, Babette Gutmann, and Meredith Bachman. "Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program." Institute of Education Sciences. U.S. Department of Education, June 2017. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20104018/pdf/20104018.pdf>.

3. HB60 strips students with disabilities of their federally-guaranteed protections under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

For students with disabilities in Georgia's public schools, federally-guaranteed protections such as the right to a free and appropriate public education and the right to due process are critical to ensure that these students are able to access a high-quality education. For a student with disabilities who chooses to receive a scholarship through the Georgia Educational Scholarship Act, the rights granted to them by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) would virtually evaporate, subjecting that student to an educational program with no guarantee or track record of successfully educating students with disabilities. In many cases, parents are unaware that their child will be losing these protections upon acceptance of a scholarship.

4. HB60 funnels taxpayer dollars to unaccountable and unregulated private schools and other private education providers.

Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) are ripe for fraud and have been shown in other states to be a gross misuse of state dollars. In Arizona, for example, an audit report from the state's Auditor General shows hundreds of thousands of state ESA funds being misspent on personal purchases.⁹ In Georgia, an audit of the state's existing QEETC program found that failure to conduct a background check of a participating Student Scholarship Organization (SSO)'s president resulted in the SSO collecting around \$760,000 in donations while the president was undergoing sentencing for securities fraud, hacking and investment fraud.

Additionally, passage of the Georgia Educational Scholarship Act would duplicate existing efforts to privatize public education in Georgia. Students with disabilities in Georgia are already able to access the GSNS and the QEETC Program.¹⁰ HB60 would not only be a misuse of state funds with significant potential for fraud; it would also be a redundant program with no clear purpose and tenuous legal authority to operate.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback on HB60 as you consider this bill in the General Assembly. We once again urge you to be mindful of the harmful effects that passage of this bill would have for Georgia's public schools and students, and we implore you to consider pathways rooted in investments in our state's public school systems as you consider improvements to education and expanding educational opportunities for our state's vulnerable student populations. Thank you.

⁹ Perry, Lindsey A. Letter to Representative Anthony Kern and Senator Bob Worsley. *Arizona Auditor General*. State of Arizona, October 25, 2018. https://www.azauditor.gov/system/tdf/16-107_24Mo_Followup.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=9096&force=0.

¹⁰ "School Privatization Policy Brief." Southern Education Foundation, July 9, 2019. https://www.southerneducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/SEF-School-Privatization-Brief-ps4B_FINAL_7-9-19.pdf.

Sincerely,

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cc: Governor Brian Kemp, Lieutenant Governor Geoff Duncan, Senate Minority Leader Gloria Butler,
Senate Education Chairman Chuck Payne, House Speaker David Ralston, House Minority Leader James
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