



Chairwoman DeLauro, Ranking Member Cole, and Members of the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee: my name is Fred Jones, and I am the Director of Government Affairs and Public Policy for the Southern Education Foundation (SEF). Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on two items in the Trump administration’s FY2021 budget: the proposed \$5 billion Education Freedom tax-credit scholarship program and the proposed elimination of the \$25 million Full-Service Community Schools program.

For background, SEF has been committed to developing and advocating for high-quality public school education for Black and low-income students throughout the South for over 150 years. SEF’s historic origins lie in providing for the education of the children of newly-freed slaves in the post-Civil War South and continue through the early years of the Civil Rights movement, such as when SEF hosted a team of researchers to produce a study, referenced in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in the U.S. Supreme Court, on the conditions of education for Black students in the South. SEF’s decades-long commitment to securing equal educational opportunities for each and every student is an underlying reason for the opposition to both President Trump’s proposed Education Freedom tax-credit scholarship program and the suggested elimination of Full-Service Community Schools program.

Education Freedom Tax-Credit Scholarships

The White House’s FY2021 proposal to create the federal Education Freedom Scholarship (EFS) calls for a \$5 billion tax break to private individuals and organizations who agree to donate to Scholarship Granting Organizations that offer financial scholarships to students who choose to attend a private school

over their neighborhood public school. SEF categorically opposes President Trump’s proposal to fund state-run tax-credit scholarship programs for the following reasons.

(1) Tax-credit scholarships do not improve student achievement. In the 23 years tax-credit scholarship programs have existed, very little scientific research has surfaced showing tax-credit scholarship recipients experiencing significant academic improvements by enrolling in a private school instead of their neighborhood public school. Out of the 21 tax-credit scholarship programs nationwide, the Exceptional Needs Scholarship in South Carolina is the only tax-credit scholarship program that publicly reports student assessment results. Both in the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 years, students participating in South Carolina’s tax-credit scholarship program experienced a decline in Reading results and made no gains in Math.¹ Because many tax-credit scholarships lack evaluation and comprehensive reporting requirements, there is a dearth of research in this area. Research on school vouchers, however, is the closest comparison that exists due to the nature of public funds (or benefits in this instance) being similarly used to pay for private school tuition. Comprehensive studies have shown that no clear academic advantage exists for students attending private schools with vouchers compared to similarly situated students attending public schools. In fact, in some states such as Louisiana² and Indiana³, participation in voucher programs had negative effects on student achievement.

(2) The majority of existing state tax-credit scholarship programs provide scholarships to students from wealthy families and exacerbate funding inequity for low-income students. Seven of the 21 tax-credit scholarships currently operating in 18 states have no family income threshold to determine

¹ “Report on the Education Credit for Exceptional Needs Children (ECENC) Program: Compliance and Assessment Results for 2017-2018.” SCEO. South Carolina House Education Oversight Committee. <https://www.scstatehouse.gov/reports/EducationOversightComm/ECENC%20Annual%20Report,%202019.pdf>.

² 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>.

³ Dynarski, Mark. “On Negative Effects of Vouchers.” The Brookings Institution, July 12, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/on-negative-effects-of-vouchers/>.

eligibility, while five more programs have a threshold above a six-figure annual income for a family of four.⁴ In Oklahoma, families of four making up to \$142,913 are eligible to receive a scholarship to attend a private school.⁵ It is inequitable to provide tax-breaks to individuals who donate money so that students from affluent families can attend private schools. It effectively reduces the federal government's annual tax revenue by \$5 billion and takes funding away from research-based school improvement efforts for low-income students who remain in the public school system. If the EFS program is implemented, it would stray far from its stated goal of expanding opportunity for students and exacerbate funding inequities in communities already devoid of adequate resources for public schools.

(3) SEF is opposed to the proposed Education Freedom Scholarship program due to the troubling history of educational choice in the South. As desegregation became federally codified in 1954 following *Brown v. Board of Education*, the rise in private school enrollment by white students in the region signified a strong desire to maintain a segregated school system. From the mid-1960s to 1980, in the peak of the era of court-ordered school desegregation, private school enrollment in the South grew by more than 200,000 students.⁶ As of 2014, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia were the only three states nationwide home to over 45 districts each with open desegregation orders.⁷ This failure to truly integrate schools and extend equal educational opportunities to students of color is a direct consequence of educational choice programs.

(4) Current statewide tax-credit scholarship programs' reporting requirements are inconsistent and, in some cases, completely absent. The majority of states report neither academic achievement nor the racial or ethnic makeup of student participants. In most cases, it is not known whether tax-credit

⁴ SEF independent analysis of states' private school choice profiles on EdChoice Dashboard.

⁵ "Oklahoma Equal Opportunity Education Scholarships." EdChoice Dashboard. EdChoice.

<https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/oklahoma-equal-opportunity-education-scholarships/>.

⁶ "A History of Private Schools & Race in the American South." Southern Education Foundation.

<https://www.southerneducation.org/publications/historyofprivateschools/>.

⁷ Qiu, Yue, and Nikole Hannah-Jones. "School Desegregation Orders." A National Survey of School Desegregation Orders. ProPublica, December 23, 2014. <https://projects.propublica.org/graphics/desegregation-orders>.

scholarship programs improve academic outcomes or which students have access to them. Due to the lack of evidence of academic improvement for students receiving tax-credit scholarships, the absence of comprehensive reporting and accountability for participating private schools, and the differing and often inequitable eligibility requirements for participation in scholarship programs, SEF is strongly opposed to the passage of Education Freedom Scholarships in the Trump administration's FY2021 budget.

Elimination of Full-Service Community Schools

Second, SEF is opposed to President Trump's budget proposal to eliminate the \$25 million Full-Service Community Schools program and consolidate it into the Elementary and Secondary Education for the Disadvantaged Block Grant (ESED Block Grant). As you know, community schools are public schools that partner with families and community organizations to provide comprehensive educational and non-academic services for overall student success. The Community Schools approach is an integrated student support approach that addresses issues such as childhood trauma, hunger, mental health, and social-emotional learning, but it also provides a platform to develop positive relationships with peers and adults and improve self-confidence. Evidence shows that intervening in such an integrated way has positive impacts on student attendance, engagement, behavior, and academic performance.⁸ The latest findings show the economic benefit of investing in community schools. For every \$1 invested, \$3 in benefits are earned across all sectors.⁹ With proper investments, community schools can narrow opportunity gaps, improve academic outcomes for students, and save tax-payer dollars.

Congress has supported the expansion of community schools by investing \$10 million, \$17.5 million, and \$25 million in FY2018, FY2019, and FY2020, respectively. Early evaluation results from

⁸ Johnston, William R., John Engberg, Isaac M. Opper, Lisa Sontag-Padilla, and Lea Xenakis. "Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools." RAND Corporation, January 28, 2020. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10107.html.

⁹ Maier, Anna, Julia Daniel, Jeannie Oakes, and Livia Lam. "Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of the Evidence." Learning Policy Institute, December 2017. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/community-schools-effective-school-improvement-brief>.

grantees show Full-Service Community Schools are serving more than 110% of the target population. There is a national surge to strategically support the whole child with integrated academic and non-academic services. For example, the Georgia Department of Education is developing a Whole Child Certification process to assist schools and districts with planning and implementing wraparound services for low-income students. The Mississippi legislature is advancing efforts to encourage chronically underperforming districts to implement community schools as a strategy to improve student outcomes.

Schools and school districts are turning to a community schools strategy, as it has been proven to improve academic results. As such, SEF is disappointed by President Trump's proposal to eliminate the advancement of community schools despite the overall academic success, social benefits and initial outcomes from reported grantees. Not only does science prove the academic, economic, and social benefits of community schools, but also parents, practitioners, and community leaders throughout the South believe integrated academic, social, and family engagement services lead to stronger schools and communities. We urge the Appropriations Committee to maintain level funding at \$25 million for the Full-Service Community Schools program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fred Jones Jr". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent "F" and "J".

Fred Jones

Director of Government Affairs and Public Policy

Southern Education Foundation