



February 11, 2022

The Honorable David Ralston
Georgia House of Representatives
18 Capitol Square SW
Atlanta, GA 30334

RE: House Bill 60 (Representative Cantrell of the 22nd) - Oppose

Dear Members of the House of Representatives,

We, the undersigned, are writing to you on behalf of the Southern Education Foundation (SEF), Public Education Matters Georgia Action Fund (PEMGA/AF), the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute (GBPI), the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA), and several other organizations in Georgia that have worked for years to overcome key barriers to equitable educational opportunities for students statewide and across the South. We are concerned that HB 60, the proposed Georgia Promise Scholarship Act, is another attempt to divert taxpayer dollars away from our state's most underserved public schools and into private schools, with limited evidence that attending private schools improves academic achievement. In fact, research findings show no material difference, or a negative difference, in learning outcomes when comparing students who use vouchers to attend private schools and those who are enrolled in public schools¹. It is the Georgia Assembly's constitutional responsibility to ensure all children have access to free public education; the advancement of HB 60 would not only perpetuate unequal opportunities for the state's public-school students but would violate Article VIII, Section I of Georgia's constitutional mandate to fund education adequately and with a high level of priority.

As the House votes on HB 60, we urge you to vote NO for the following reasons:

1. **HB 60 diverts resources away from already under-resourced public-school systems, further limiting educational opportunities for Georgia's most vulnerable student populations.**

¹ Dynarski, M. (2016). On negative effects of vouchers. *Evid Speak Reports*, 1, 1-9.

HB 60 establishes an enrollment cap of 4,300 students, or 0.25 percent of the state's total public-school enrollment, which would mean that the voucher program would cost the state \$25.2 million for the school year and, using enrollment and per-pupil expenditure figures and assuming normal growth, \$288.4 million annually once its 2.5 percent enrollment cap is reached in the 2031-32 school year. Adding these amounts to the nearly \$100 million the state already spends on private school choice programs annually² paints a picture of misguided priorities for our state – particularly as schools are struggling to hire necessary staff such as bus drivers or substitute teachers.

In the area of student well-being, schools are increasingly grappling with student mental health issues, but public schools in Georgia currently have a ratio of less than one school counselor for every 450 students. The American School Counselors Association recommends a counselor-to-student ratio of 1:250.³ Worse still, Georgia remains one of only six states in the nation that does not provide schools additional funding specifically to support students living in poverty. This leaves the state's most vulnerable children without resources that wealthier families enjoy, and the effects of poverty can impact generations.⁴

Due to impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, students in rural and urban communities have an even greater need for the academic, social, emotional, nutritional, and digital (e.g., high-speed internet and devices) support schools provide. Specifically concerning the digital divide, 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 Georgia families making over \$150,000 per year lack access to high-speed home internet.⁵ Forty-four percent of households in rural Georgia are without high-speed home internet, while 21 percent of families living in metropolitan areas lack 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. Ensuring that students have the capability to access the internet and make use of digital tools is increasingly needed for quality education.

2. HB 60 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. Georgia's own existing voucher programs do not publicly report students' academic performance; a new voucher program and major financial investment do not make sense when the effectiveness of existing programs in the state

² 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>.

³ American School Counselor Association. School counselor roles & ratios. <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/About-School-Counseling/School-Counselor-Roles-Ratios>

⁴ Crowe, M. "Economic Vitality and Education in the South, part I: The South's Pre-pandemic Position." Southern Education Foundation, January 2022. <https://www.southerneducation.org/publications/economic-vitality-and-education-in-the-south-eves-prepandemic-position/>

⁵ "Students of Color Caught in the Homework Gap." Future Ready, 2020. <https://futureready.org/homework-gap/>.

is unknown. We do know that in some states, participation in voucher programs had negative effects on student achievement, with students enrolled in the Louisiana Scholarship Program⁶ reducing their chance of passing math by 50% 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 in many instances failed to produce results and widened long-standing opportunity and achievement gaps between different groups of students.

3. HB 60 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 ensuring that these students are able to access a high-quality education. Students with disabilities who choose to receive a scholarship through the Georgia Educational Scholarship Act surrender rights granted to them by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This subjects them to educational programs with no track record of successfully educating students with disabilities and no federal protections which would be provided in a public education. In many cases, parents are unaware that their child will be surrendering these protections upon acceptance of a scholarship.

4. HB 60 funnels taxpayer dollars to unaccountable and unregulated private schools and other private education providers.

Passage of the Georgia Promise Scholarship Act would create educational savings accounts in Georgia. 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 dollars in state ESA funds being misspent on personal purchases.⁹ In Georgia, an audit of the state's existing Qualified Education Expenses Tax Credit (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.

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>.

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.

Additionally, the Georgia Promise Scholarship Act would duplicate existing efforts to privatize public education in Georgia. Students with disabilities in Georgia are already able to access the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship (GSNS) program and the QEETC program.¹⁰ HB 60 would not only be a misuse of state funds with significant potential for fraud; it would also be a program with no clear purpose and tenuous legal authority to operate.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback on HB 60 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.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Raymond C. Pierce". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Raymond C. Pierce

President and CEO

Southern Education Foundation

Coco Pay

Director of Public Policy and Communications

Deep Center Savannah

Lisa Morgan

President

Georgia Association of Educators

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.

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