



Public money for public schools, period!

What would Thomas Jefferson think if he could see what New Jersey is in the process of doing to its public schools? He was convinced that a public, universal education was essential for the survival of a representative democracy, an idea that continues to inspire countries around the world to invest much of their resources in public education. But this year, we have seen greatly reduced funding for our schools and an effort to divert public money to support private schools, reducing what some schools get even more.

Reduced state funding to schools is painful, but somewhat understandable, given the deep recession we are in and the fact that the State must balance its budget every year. But the “Opportunity Scholarship Act” will strain every State budget for the next five years, as it allows corporations to give money each year to a “scholarship fund” and deduct 100% of it from their state taxes. The total amounts allowed would be up to \$24 million during the first year, increasing by \$24 million each of the five years, for a total of \$360 million that could be diverted from the State treasury for vouchers that students could use to attend private and religious schools, or a public school in another district.

With a voucher value of \$6,000 for each K-8 student and \$9,000 for a high school student, no more than 4,000 students would be able to acquire them the first year, with the total rising to around 20,000 the last year, so the bill could benefit only a small number over the whole state. More importantly, the district from which the student comes (which only has to have one ‘underperforming school’ in it) will lose its per pupil aid for all who leave with vouchers, leaving the home district with even fewer resources to improve education for the remaining students. That district can do little to decrease its fixed expenses, and could not save the cost of a teacher unless enough students to fill a classroom (all in the same grade) received vouchers.

Right now, the bill allows up to 25% of the scholarship funds to be reserved for low income students already attending private or religious schools. It does not require that their home school or district be “chronically underperforming.” Instead it seeks to help subsidize private and religious educational institutions with tax money that corporations give to the scholarship fund instead of the state. This plan completely subverts Jefferson’s original concept of public money supporting a universal education for all.

Now the sponsor is proposing to limit the program to “chronically failing schools in specific municipalities” based on local legislators’ *support*, rather than open it to all troubled school districts. That smacks of vote buying. Another proposed change would

eliminate an innovation fund that would award grants to struggling schools, further limiting the chances for those students left behind.

But no matter how this bill is tweaked, it is bad policy. Public money should be used on public education, with enough resources supplied by the state (all of us, through our taxes) to make sure that teachers are well-trained and students get the support they need to meet high standards, no matter what their socioeconomic status. Taxes should not be diverted to private schools.

- Anne Maiese, President, League of Women Voters of New Jersey