



PHILADELPHIA

FEDERATION of TEACHERS

TO: MEMBERS OF THE PENNSYLVANIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

FROM: JERRY T. JORDAN, PRESIDENT, PHILADELPHIA FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

RE: EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNTS (ESAs); SCHOOL CONDITIONS; FUNDING MECHANISMS

May 21, 2018

It is unfortunate that the State Senate is once again slated to consider Senate Bill 2. We are at a critical moment in public education, and the Legislature has consequential decisions before them. **Does the legislature seek to advance a mission to which it is constitutionally bound—that every student has the right to a thorough and efficient public education?**

If the legislature's goal is to adhere to its constitutional mandate and moral imperative, then it must address systemic issues of underfunded public education that specifically harms students of color living in poverty.

Just this month, a three-part expose in the Philadelphia Inquirer brought to the forefront the issue of **toxic building conditions** in far too many of our schools. I urge every lawmaker to read Parts [One](#), [Two](#), and [Three](#), and [utilize the interactive tool](#) to navigate school-by-school reports on lead paint, lead in water, asbestos, and other harmful issues.

The *Inquirer's* reporting starkly highlights the extraordinary importance of investing in our schools. Instead of looking to invest \$500 million into a voucher scheme that moves us even further from our mandate of providing a thorough and efficient public education to every child, the State Legislature should be looking for ways to increase the funding to our public schools. We are in support of commonsense ways to increase revenue, such as via a tax on the Marcellus Shale (as outlined in SB777 and a number of other bills).

Below, I outline the Federation's staunch **opposition to SB2** or any other voucher legislation. I urge you to not only reject this legislation but instead to look to fulfill the constitutional mandate of ensuring that every child is provided a quality public education.

EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNTS: Vouchers by another name
The PFT is OPPOSED to SB 2 or any other voucher legislation.

Public education is a public good. Funding public education for every child is not optional, and it is no secret that the Pennsylvania State Constitution requires a thorough and efficient public education for every child in the commonwealth. The refurbished voucher plan that has resurfaced under the guise of "Education Savings Accounts" is simply another way to circumvent our constitutional and

moral obligation to ensure that every child, regardless of race, gender identity, immigration status, or income.

A [recent analysis by Keystone Crossroads](#) estimates that the implementation of ESAs as proposed would siphon nearly 1/5th of the public education budget from public schools. This would, undoubtedly, target schools educating students living in poverty as well as school districts educating large populations of English Language Learners and students with special needs.

Investing in ESAs and other voucher schemes with opaque requirements and regulations only furthers exacerbates the inequities our students experience each day. This scheme further detracts us from what should be our shared commitment to fully funding public education for students in every community.

National Research

The concept of Education Savings Accounts is one that has been implemented in a number of places, and it is one that has raised serious red flags. I urge you to review the [research put forth by our national union, the American Federation of Teachers](#). I am attaching a copy for your convenience. Among the highlights from the document, you will find the following:

- The Nevada Supreme Court has suspended funding of education savings accounts. The court found that the education savings account legislation did not contain an appropriation to fund its operation in accordance with the state constitution's requirement that "no money shall be drawn from the treasury but in consequence of appropriations made by law," and enjoined any use of funds from money appropriated from the Legislature's K-12 public education appropriation law.
- Most education savings account programs have been passed with minimal fiscal oversight or accountability requirements for private schools and participating parents.
- Education savings account programs have few protections to ensure that only high-quality schools and educational programs are eligible for vouchers. For example, the only requirement for a qualified school in Arizona is that the school not discriminate based on race, color or national origin.
- No state requires a private school to employ state-certified teachers, or accept all students that apply to the school.
- ESAs have the potential to increase inequity and hinder public accountability. And these programs' harms do not come with the benefits that voucher proponents proffer: student performance improvement.
- ESA programs' allocation of funding for special needs and at-risk students attempts to convert per-pupil funding numbers into an individual entitlement. As a result, special needs and at-risk students receive less support and fewer services by participating in ESA programs than they would if they had remained in a public school.
- Large-scale education savings account programs can be expected to have general education students leaving public schools at a greater rate than special education students. This is likely the result of private schools being less likely to provide special education services at the same level as public schools.

- Emerging research indicates that large enrollment losses to choice programs are systematically undermining the finances of school districts.
- The subsidization of the education of children of affluent parents who would attend private schools or home school is a substantial new cost and will limit the revenues available for traditional public school students.
- A study of Georgia voucher schools by the Southern Education Foundation found that 115 voucher schools had explicit anti-gay policies or belonged to private school associations that promote such policies. And some voucher schools use textbooks that defend the majority of American slaveholders and the Ku Klux Klan.
- Nothing in these laws prevents private schools from having their own admissions policies.
- Across the county, teachers in religious institutions can and are fired for things public school teachers do legally every day, because the religious institution governing the school considers such conduct “immoral.”
- Education savings accounts—either universal or more limited programs—are another choice program that drains money from public schools, has no academic or fiscal accountability to taxpayers and families, and is not likely to raise student achievement. Instead of jumping on the latest privatization fad, states should invest in public schools and research-backed strategies to improve student achievement. This means collaboration among stakeholders built on shared responsibility and accountability. It means addressing the needs of communities through community schools and wraparound services. And it means listening to educators about what real reform looks like and how to help our kids equitably, based on what children need, not who they are.

Conclusion

A program designed to once again shortchange students in public schools has no place in Pennsylvania. We should be working to determine how to best ensure that public education is fully funded in every community, and to fight for equity across the system. This legislation, in any form, must be rejected at the national level, and it certainly must be rejected in Pennsylvania.

Contact: [Hillary Linardopoulos | hillaryL@pft.org](mailto:hillaryL@pft.org) | 215-587-6752