

May 18, 2018

The Honorable John McCain
Chair, Senate Armed Services Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jack Reed
Ranking Member, Senate Armed Services
Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Oppose Creating a Private School Voucher Program for Military-Connected Children as Part of the National Defense Authorization Act FY 2019

Dear Chairman McCain and Ranking Member Reed:

The 63 undersigned organizations write to oppose the inclusion of any provision to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) FY 2019 that would create a private school voucher program. In particular, we oppose the inclusion of S. 2517, which would transform Impact Aid into Education Savings Accounts (ESAs).

In effect, ESAs are no different than traditional private school vouchers; they transfer funding that would ordinarily support students attending public schools into an account for students to use on other education expenses, including private school tuition. Like vouchers, ESAs divert desperately needed resources away from the public school system to fund the education of a few, select students in alternative settings. And, a voucher funded by Impact Aid would take away critical funding from school districts serving the majority of military-connected students¹ and funnel those federal dollars to private and unaccountable education providers for families who can already afford a private school education for their child. This would undermine the public school systems that educate the majority of military-connected students.

Furthermore, S. 2517 like all voucher programs, lacks accountability, would strip students of rights and protections, and could lead to declines in students' educational outcomes.

Diverting Impact Aid Would Reduce Critical Funding for School Districts Serving Military-Connected and American Indian Students

Impact Aid provides funding to school districts that have lost local tax revenue due to the presence of federal tax-exempt land—such as military installations, Native American reservations, or national parks—and that face increased expenditures due to the enrollment of federally-connected students—such as children of military families and American Indian and

¹Approximately 80% of children of military families attend public school. Dep't of Def. Education Activity, [All About DoDEA Educational Partnership](#) (last visited Feb. 28, 2018).

Alaska Native students.² As of 2016, Impact Aid provided funding to approximately 1,300 school districts enrolling more than 11 million students.³

Impact Aid funds the general operating budget of the school district and is necessary for implementing district-and school-wide programs. The funds serve all students in the district, and the school district can concentrate the funding where it is needed the most. For example, school districts use Impact Aid to hire and train teachers and staff, invest in technology, purchase buses and classroom equipment, and provide educational programming, including for students with disabilities. Turning Impact Aid into a per-pupil allocation would not only run contrary to the purpose of Impact Aid, but would also reduce the funding for these critical services that the school districts provide to all students. As a result, the majority of students, who would remain in the public school system, would have fewer resources.

Reducing Impact Aid funding for public schools would also place a great financial burden on the local community, which would be left to fund public schools with an already low level of local tax revenue. This is particularly unfair to these communities, as many federally impacted school districts pay higher than average taxes because of the lack of taxable property or taxpayers in their communities.

Congress would better serve these federally-impacted communities by fully funding Impact Aid instead of diverting federal funding into a private school voucher plan.

Private School Vouchers Undermine Public Schools, Which Provide Military-Connected Students with Important Supports and Services

Military-connected students face unique challenges due to frequent relocations as well as the absence of parents who may be deployed overseas. These challenges are recognized by public school districts through coordinated academic transfer agreements in every state, as well as comprehensive systems of support for students, including professional development for school counselors, to ensure a safe and healthy learning environment. A redirection of additional resources away from public schools through any type of voucher program will only make it more difficult—if not impossible—for public schools to appropriately meet the needs of military-connected students and their families.

Public schools also meet the unique challenges that military-connected students face through the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, which is an agreement among states and school districts to address issues relating to enrollment, placement, attendance, eligibility, and graduation.⁴ The goal of the compact is to “reduc[e] the difficulty children of military families . . . have in transferring between school systems because of frequent moves and deployment of their parents.”⁵ The compact, adopted by all 50 states and DC, does not extend to non-public schools, and therefore would be forfeited by students whose families choose to participate in a voucher program.

² Dep’t of Educ., [About Impact Aid](#) (last visited Feb. 28, 2018).

³ National Association of Federally Impacted Schools, [The Basics of Impact Aid](#) (last visited Feb. 28, 2018).

⁴ Military Interstate Children’s Compact Commission, [Background](#) (last visited Feb. 28, 2018).

⁵ Dep’t of Defense Instruction 1342.29, [Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children](#) (Jan. 31, 2017).

The Voucher Program in S. 2517 Lacks Basic Accountability Mechanisms for Federal Dollars

The ESA program created by S. 2517 operates like a blank check for parents to use on virtually any expense related to their child's education including uniforms, laptops, transportation to school, and college savings. Unlike other state ESA programs, which require parents to submit receipts demonstrating that the funds have been used for approved educational purposes, this program operates on an honor system where parents simply attest that they are using the funds for legitimate, reasonable educational purposes. Without any additional oversight, it is likely that these funds could be misused. For example, a parent could pay themselves for tutoring their own child in math.

S. 2517 also lacks other important accountability mechanisms common in other state ESA programs. For example, it does not require educational service providers to acquire accreditation status, to abide by nondiscrimination provisions, to implement testing requirements, or to report any program information publicly. In fact, as a clear signal about its intent to remain free from even basic accountability measures, the bill explicitly prohibits the federal or state government from exercising any oversight over the program.

Yet, the ESA program that S. 2517 would establish could be expansive. There is no cap on how many students can participate, and the vast array of allowable educational expenses range from private school tuition to summer camp to college tuition. Taxpayers should not be expected to fund a program that provides little to no accountability for how these federal dollars will be spent.

The Voucher Program in S. 2517 Would Not Benefit Military-Connected Families Who Cannot Already Afford Private School

The vast majority of military-connected families eligible for the ESA would receive \$2,500 to use for private school tuition and other educational expenses. According to 2014 data from the Nation Center for Education Statistics, the average price of a year of private elementary school is \$7,770, and the average annual cost of private high school is \$13,030.⁶ Given that many private schools already provide financial aid to students, it is highly unlikely that \$2,500 will put a private school education in-reach for many military families. It is likely, however, that families could use this \$2500 to place into a 529 account, which will provide no immediate benefit to that student in the current school year. Congress should not divide military families into haves and have-nots by subsidizing the education of children whose families can already afford private schooling, while at the same time redirecting resources away from the children who remain in the public school system and who count on Impact Aid to provide critical supports to their school.

Private School Vouchers Are Ineffective and Harmful Education Policy

Private school voucher and ESA programs are ineffective education policy. It is well-documented that private school voucher programs do not lead to improved academic achievement, and, in

⁶ Dep't of Educ., Nat'l Ctr. for Educ. Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), [Private School Data File](#), 1999-2000, 2003-04, 2007-08, and 2011-12. (This table was prepared in December 2015.)

many states, can lead to a decline in achievement. Recent studies of the Louisiana,⁷ Indiana,⁸ Ohio,⁹ and the District of Columbia¹⁰ voucher programs have demonstrated that students who used vouchers perform worse academically than their peers. In addition, studies of long-standing voucher programs in Milwaukee¹¹ and Cleveland¹² found that students who received vouchers showed no improvement in reading or math over those not in the program.

Private schools that receive voucher and ESA students also do not adhere to all federal civil rights laws and public accountability standards that all public schools must meet, including those in Title IX, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and ESEA. For example, private schools can and do turn students away on the basis of students' or their parents' faith, sexual orientation, gender identity, disciplinary history, and disability. Private voucher schools also do not adequately serve students with disabilities, often failing to provide them the same quality of services they would receive in public schools, including those mandated under each student's individualized education program (IEP).¹³ Moreover, vouchers and ESAs violate religious liberty by primarily funding religious schools. Parents certainly may choose such an education for their children, but no taxpayer should be required to pay for another's religious education.

Conclusion

The very families S. 2517 purports to serve are the same who have rejected turning Impact Aid into a private school voucher program. The National Military Family Association has already opposed this proposal to divert Impact Aid from schools that educate military-connected students¹⁴ and the Military Officers Association of America has expressed similar concerns.¹⁵ The Military Coalition, a consortium of uniformed services and veterans organizations representing more than 5.5 million current and former service members and their families also opposes any proposal to turn Impact Aid into a voucher.¹⁶ In addition, a number of military serving organizations have affirmatively expressed support for the Impact Aid program.¹⁷

⁷ Morgan Winsor, [Louisiana's Controversial Voucher Program Harms Poor Students, Lowers Grades, New Study Finds](#), Int'l Bus. Times (Jan. 10, 2016).

⁸ Mark Dynarski, [On Negative Effects of Vouchers](#), Brookings Inst. (May 26, 2016).

⁹ David Figlio & Krzysztof Karbownik, Fordham Institute, [Evaluation of Ohio's EdChoice Scholarship Program: Selection, Competition, and Performance Effects](#) 32 (July 2016).

¹⁰ U.S. Dep't of Educ., [Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: Impacts After One Year](#) 11 (Apr. 2017).

¹¹ E.g., Patrick J. Wolf, School Choice Demonstration Project, Univ. of Ark., [The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Final Reports](#) (Apr. 2010). (Overall, there are no significant achievement gains of voucher students compared to public school students. "When similar MPCP and MPS students are matched and tracked over four years, the achievement growth of MPCP students compared to MPS students is higher in reading but similar in math. The MPCP achievement advantage in reading is only conclusive in 2010-11, the year a high-stakes testing policy was added to the MPCP.")

¹² E.g., Jonathan Plucker et al., Ctr. for Evaluation & Educ. Policy, Univ. of Ind., [Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, Technical Report 1998-2004](#) 166 (Feb. 2006).

¹³ For example, a 2010 study of the Washington, DC voucher program found that 21.6% of parents who rejected a voucher that was offered to their child did so because the school lacked the special services that their child needed and, 12.3% of the parents who accepted a voucher for their child but then left the program cited a lack of special needs services at the school they had chosen. U.S. Dep't of Educ., [Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report](#), 24-26 (June 2010).

¹⁴ MJ Boice, [This School Voucher Plan Is Not the Answer for Military Families](#), National Military Family Association (Mar. 1, 2018);

¹⁵ Brooke Goldberg, [Will Proposed Education Savings Accounts Help or Hurt Military Kids?](#), Military Officers Association of America (last visited Mar. 7, 2018).

¹⁶ [Letter from The Military Coalition Opposing H.R. 5199](#) (Apr. 5, 2018).

¹⁷ [Joint Statement on Impact Aid: Military Service Organizations Support Impact Aid](#) (Dec. 13, 2017).

The men and women who serve our country should not have to reach outside our public education system, which is intended to serve every child in America, to provide their children with a quality education. They deserve better than a private school voucher scheme. We urge you to also oppose any provision to create a private school voucher program and instead to support the public schools that serve all students and that are specifically-equipped to serve our military-connected students.

Sincerely,

AASA: The School Superintendents Association

African American Ministers In Action

American Association of University Women (AAUW)

American Atheists

AFL-CIO

American Civil Liberties Union

American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA), AFL-CIO

American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

American Humanist Association

Americans for Religious Liberty

Americans United for Separation of Church and State

Anti-Defamation League

The Arc of the United States

Association of Educational Service Agencies

Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents

Association of School Business Officials International

Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD)

Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty

Center for American Progress

Center for Inquiry

Central Conference of American Rabbis

Clearinghouse On Women's Issues

Council for Exceptional Children

Council of Administrators of Special Education

Council of the Great City Schools

Disciples Center for Public Witness

Disciples Justice Action Network

Eating Disorders Coalition

Education Law Center

Equal Partners in Faith

Federal Lands Impacted Schools Association

Freedom From Religion Foundation

GLSEN

Interfaith Alliance

Learning Disabilities Association of America

Men of Reform Judaism

Military Impacted Schools Association

National Alliance of Black School Educators
NAACP
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Federally Impacted Schools
National Association of School Psychologists
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Black Justice Coalition
National Center for Learning Disabilities
National Center for Lesbian Rights
National Council of Jewish Women
National Disability Rights Network
National Education Association
National Indian Impacted Schools Association
National Organization for Women
National PTA
National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition
National Rural Education Association
National School Boards Association
Network for Public Education
People For the American Way
School Social Work Association of America
Secular Coalition for America
Southern Poverty Law Center
Union for Reform Judaism
Women of Reform Judaism