



1201 16th St., N.W. | Washington, DC 20036 | Phone: (202) 833-4000

Lily Eskelsen García
President

Rebecca S. Pringle
Vice President

Princess R. Moss
Secretary-Treasurer

John C. Stocks
Executive Director

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Dear Representative:

On behalf of the three million members of the National Education Association (NEA) and the 50 million students they serve, **we strongly urge you to hold a recorded vote** on the *Scholarships for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) Reauthorization Act* and to **Vote No** during the bill's markup on Wednesday. The SOAR Act reauthorizes the Washington D.C. private school voucher program. Votes associated with this issue may be included in the NEA Legislative Report Card for the 115th Congress.

Public education is the foundation of our 21st-century democracy. Educators strive every day to make public schools a place that welcomes every student and prepares them to reach their full potential and contribute to our society, economy, and citizenry. We expect our elected leaders and policymakers, regardless of party affiliation, to value and support this uniquely American vision for a strong and inclusive public education system that ensures that all students can succeed. Instead, President Trump and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos have been pushing their private school choice agenda to dismantle public education in our country. In light of these realities, we call on Members of Congress who support public education to oppose continuation of the D.C. voucher program.

The D.C. private school voucher program is diverting funds from public to private schools at a time when sequester-level budget cuts are hurting students by leaving essential federal programs like Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) severely underfunded. All public schools need sufficient funding as they begin implementing the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Vouchers deprive students of important rights and protections. Private schools that participate in the D.C. voucher program receive public money, but they are not subject to all the federal civil rights laws that public schools must meet—they may discriminate against a student based on his or her gender, disability, religion, economic background, national origin, academic record, English language ability, or disciplinary history. Students with special needs who use vouchers lose many rights granted under IDEA and may not have the protection of an individualized education plan. As a result, a significant number of students with special needs reject vouchers or leave voucher schools because they fail to provide essential services ([Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program](#), U.S. Department of Education, June 2010). Students may also suffer because private schools are not subject to the same oversight, transparency, and accountability standards as public schools.

All four congressionally mandated U.S. Department of Education reports on the D.C. voucher program's impact on student achievement (published in [June 2010](#), [March 2009](#), [June 2008](#), and

[June 2007](#)) found no statistically significant overall impact in reading or math scores among participants. The program also had no impact on students' satisfaction, motivation, engagement, or perceptions of school safety. Moreover, participating students were less likely to have access to key services such as ESL programs, learning supports, special education supports and services, and counselors.

The U.S. Department of Education's [most recent report](#) on the SOAR Act's impact on the D.C. voucher program, published barely a year ago, found that:

- **Most vouchers still do not cover the full cost of private school tuition.** In 64 percent of the participating schools, tuition exceeds the voucher cap. In light of this reality, the program can ultimately only help students from families with the means to make up the difference.
- **Vouchers still do not help kids most in need.** While 69 percent of the students who apply for vouchers live in wards 1, 5, 7, and 8 (the least affluent areas of the city), less than half (43 percent) of the participating schools are located there. Many voucher students do not come from public schools labeled "in need of improvement," but from other public—or even private—schools. If the program's true goal is to lift up kids in poverty and expand their educational opportunities, it fails to do so.

Students can also suffer because private schools are not subject to the same oversight, transparency, and accountability standards as public schools. Two U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports document the many ways in which the D.C. voucher program falls short of basic accountability standards—even those that are statutorily required ([Actions Needed to Address Weaknesses in Administration and Oversight](#), September 2013 and [Additional Policies and Procedures Would Improve Internal Controls and Program Operations](#), November 2007). For example, Serving Our Children, the organization responsible for managing the voucher program, has no way to verify that schools are in compliance with the standards the SOAR Act outlines: maintaining valid certificates of occupancy and proper accreditation, providing information on student achievement to parents, being financially viable, and employing only teachers with bachelor's degrees for core subjects. Instead, the Trust relies on schools to "self-certify."

Again, **we urge you to hold a recorded vote and to Vote No on the *SOAR Reauthorization Act***. Instead of taking taxpayer funds away from public schools and handing them over to private schools that only admit a select few students, we should focus on equipping all students for success and closing opportunity gaps for all students, no matter what zip code they live in.

Sincerely,



Marc Egan
Director of Government Relations