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December 21, 2017

United States Congress
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator/Representative:

On behalf of our three million members and the 50 million students they serve, we would like to express our views on the supplemental appropriations bill (H.R. 4667) that provides \$81 billion in disaster aid. Congress is overdue in providing sufficient relief for the millions of citizens and scores of communities still recovering from recent natural disasters — hurricanes in Florida, Texas, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, and wildfires in California.

We acknowledge that some provisions of the bill provide educational assistance, but would be remiss if we also failed to convey it is troubling to see Congress take advantage of natural disasters to push school vouchers. This bill allows federal money to go to both public and private schools that enroll displaced students. In our view, public funds for this purpose should be directed only to public schools.

Vouchers weaken public schools by siphoning off scarce resources. They send public funds to private schools that are unaccountable to the public. At a time when public education is facing serious budget challenges — challenges the new tax bill will only exacerbate — we should not be spending taxpayer dollars on private and religious schools that can pick and choose students based on their economic status, academic achievements, or the language they speak. Moreover, we believe that any school receiving federal funds for accepting displaced students should be fully accredited to be eligible for the funds.

Many of the children in the affected areas have witnessed disasters, been uprooted from their homes, and suffered other traumas. They need schools ready and equipped to offer a well-rounded education and the support services — like counseling, health care, and nutritious meals — that our public schools provide on a daily basis.

We recognize that the voucher program in the disaster aid bill is temporary. Nonetheless, it is a step in the wrong direction. Congress should always focus on using federal tax dollars to support the public schools that educate 90 percent of America's students.

Sincerely,

Marc Egan
Director of Government Relations
National Education Association