



Secular Maryland

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February 20, 2024

HB0/91 - UNF

Operating Budget - Funding - Scholarships for Nonpublic School Students

Dear Chair Ben Barnes, Vice-Chair Mark S. Chang, and Members of the Appropriations Committee,

Secular Maryland advocates for all youth to be educated in modern knowledge without omissions or qualifications. Our collective knowledge is rooted in an international consensus of subject matter experts that is logically derived using an overall best fit with the available empirical evidence criteria. Finding empirical evidence and convincingly relating the evidence to conclusions requires effort and time. The history of the pursuit of knowledge demonstrates that this epistemology is uniquely successful, there is no other approach that reliably reaches accurate conclusions about how our universe functions. Beliefs about how the universe functions that are derived outside the aforementioned framework are not knowledge. Teaching such beliefs to children as if they are knowledge is miseducation.

There are few restrictions on what private schools can teach their students, so they may mix academics, religion, and politics tightly together. Religious schools often have an institutional self-interest to try to convince children to accept the school's definition of deity. Young children are impressionable, teenagers are responsive to peer pressure, and as a result they are vulnerable to indoctrination. They may be taught that faith is one of the most important virtues, that one faith is superior to all other faiths, that they will be severely punished for disbelieving and greatly rewarded for believing, that particular beliefs about how the universe functions are requisite for morality thusly invalidating all other competing beliefs, They may actively teach children to distrust and fear competing perspectives, including secular academics. Some schools teach children blatant falsehoods that contradict modern scientific consensus. The result is potentially harmful miseducation that undermines the targeted victim's intellectual potential and can be difficult to undo

Private schools eligible for Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) vouchers are disproportionately religious and Catholic. The Pew Forum Religious Landscape Study estimated that 15% of Maryland residents are Catholic and 10% do not believe in a God. Yet 65% of the private schools that qualified for BOOST scholarship vouchers in 2016 were Catholic and 3% were nonreligious. Private schools are essentially religious institutions – Catholic, evangelical, Jewish, Muslim, etc. – whose enrollments and curriculum tend to reflect their sectarian orientation. Diverting public funds to private schools increases the separation among student populations along religious, ideological, and ethnic lines.

Even those religiously affiliated private schools that are the most ecumenical, that eschew holy book inerrancy, that seek to embrace modern knowledge, gratuitously add some unsubstantiated religious content and avoid some scientific details when teaching children how the universe functions to promote their religious worldview, resulting in a subtly biased and compromised education. Schools that do not promote young or old earth creationism or intelligent design may instead promote theistic evolution. These schools may teach students that satan intervenes in our universe and associate satan with non-theism. They may teach about Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jonah, virgin birth, resurrection, etc. as if they were historical facts. A commitment to know the facts regarding how the universe functions and to understand how to reliably distinguish between well-justified and poorly justified assertions are valuable civic virtues that government should be fostering, not undermining with private school “scholarships”.

Funding private school education is unlikely to provide better educational outcomes for Maryland’s children overall. At a Congressional House Education and Workforce Committee hearing on February 3, 2016 titled “Expanding Educational Opportunity through School Choice,” Luis Huerta, Associate Professor of Education & Public Policy at Columbia University, stated that none of the independent studies of the nation’s “most lauded and long-standing voucher programs...found any statistical evidence that children who utilized vouchers performed better than children who did not and remained in public schools.” However, Huerta said there is “evidence to support that[,] compared against students who participate in voucher programs, public school students fare better academically.” GAO researchers examined voucher and tax credit programs nationwide but concentrated on the major ones in Arizona, Indiana, Ohio and Wisconsin. The GAO reported on Sept. 12, 2016 that such programs “have weaker standards for teacher preparedness than public schools” and “cherry-pick student applicants ... often

discriminating against some students based on their religion or disability-related behaviors".

If this law is really about improving the quality of education and not about government subsidizing promotion of religious beliefs then BOOST eligible schools should be required to evaluate their students with the same standardized tests that public schools are required to utilize. The average test results of local public schools could then be compared with the average test results of the private schools that qualify for the vouchers. Vouchers could then be granted to those students attending eligible private schools only if their local public school scores lower on those tests than the private school.

If lawmakers want to reduce the cost of private education then they can provide additional funding to public schools to allow otherwise privately educated children to attend public school classes part time and/or to participate in public school sponsored extracurricular activities. Each county can have their own law regarding the extent to which their state public school classes and facilities are available to children who are otherwise receiving a private education. Private schools, and homeschooled children, should be lent the same government purchased textbooks that are utilized by the secular public schools. If lawmakers want to increase school choice then more publicly accountable charter schools provides a better alternative. These approaches to assisting privately educated children or to provide school choice minimize most of the problems that otherwise result from direct or indirect government funding of unaccountable private schools with parochial ideological agendas.

Respectfully,
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