

Oppose Secretary DeVos's "Continue to Learn" Private School Voucher Program

Secretary DeVos intends to exploit the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic to propose a voucher program she calls "microgrants." Although the purported purpose of the program may be to allow students to continue their education while schools remain closed, make no mistake that the mechanism is simply another taxpayer-funded private school voucher scheme. The program would shift public dollars to private and for-profit entities for a variety of educational expenses, including paying student tuition and fees for online learning courses. This proposal should not be included in the next COVID-19 relief package.

This Proposal Would Create a Federally Funded Private School Voucher Program

- This proposal would provide direct grants to students to use for educational expenses like private or for-profit online learning courses and services provided by private schools. This is simply a private school voucher program by another name.

This Unprecedented Pandemic Should Not Be Exploited to Promote Unaccountable, Inequitable, and Ineffective Vouchers

- The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented interruption in our school systems, forcing students and educators out of the classroom and leaving children and families without the same access to educational programs and services.
- Congress should use the opportunity to provide greater funding and resources for our public schools, which are best-equipped to support all students, rather than creating a program to funnel federal funds to private and unaccountable educational entities.
- Public school educators have stepped up to the plate to learn new technologies and ways of teaching to serve our students. Our nation's educators are resilient, innovative, and flexible. They should be supported in this time of crisis, just as they have stepped up to support their students in new ways.

This Proposal Allows for Broad, Unaccountable Use of Taxpayer Funds

- Eligibility criteria and oversight provisions have not been provided. This program could thus divert relief funds that are desperately needed elsewhere to unqualified online vendors, with no provision for evaluating effectiveness or recovering misspent funds.
- Without adequate oversight there is increased risk for waste, fraud, and abuse. Congress should not send desperately needed dollars to an unaccountable program.

Private School Vouchers Would Exacerbate, Not Alleviate, Equity Gaps

- Private schools accepting vouchers would likely have no obligation to accept nor appropriately serve students with disabilities. The federal government should not fund education programs that can discriminate against students with disabilities.
- Vouchers for services and therapies designed to serve the needs of students with disabilities are generally not sufficient to meet the needs of these students. For example, voucher schools often cannot provide the same quality and quantity of services available to students in public schools, including those mandated under each student's

individualized education program (IEP). Given the additional challenges online classes present for some students, these vouchers could not possibly address the needs of our most medically fragile students, or fund the accommodations and services required by students' IEPs. School closures required to address the current public health crisis have revealed stark equity gaps in this country. Vouchers for some, but not all, students would merely increase this divide.

Vouchers for K-12 Education Are Different from Microgrants for Higher Education

- Microgrants may be appropriate for financial assistance for students attending colleges and universities, but not for K-12 education. Higher education is voluntary and costly, and microgrants in that context are an evidence-based practice used to help students remain in college in the face of unexpected financial challenges. Our nation's public elementary and secondary schools, on the other hand, are compulsory and free for all students. Thus, there is no need to provide this type of financial assistance for K-12 students.
- The vouchers in this proposal could provide public funds for religious education. There is a difference in the way higher education and K-12 religious schools integrate religion into the curriculum. Unlike colleges and universities, religious elementary and secondary schools integrate religion throughout their curriculum, so it is impossible to prevent a publicly funded voucher from funding religious activities, materials, and education.¹

¹ See *Tilton v. Richardson*, 403 U.S. 672, 687 (1971) (finding “there is less likelihood [in higher education] than in primary and secondary schools that religion will permeate the area of secular education”); see also *Roemer v. Bd. of Pub. Works of Maryland*, 426 U.S. 736, 762, 764-65 (1976); *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602, 616 (1971).



The **National Coalition for Public Education** comprises more than 50 education, civic, civil rights, and religious organizations devoted to the support of public schools. Founded in 1978, NCPE opposes the funnelling of public money to private and religious schools through such mechanisms as tuition tax credits and vouchers.