



Education Law Center

Standing Up for Public School Children

TESTIMONY OF EDUCATION LAW CENTER

ON SENTATE BILL 1872 – THE OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIP ACT

MAY 13, 2010

Good morning members of the Economic Growth Committee. My name is Dr. Lauren Hill, and I represent the Education Law Center and the Our Children/Our Schools Coalition. Thank you for this opportunity to share comments regarding Senate Bill 1872, a bill that would, for the first time in New Jersey's history, authorize the use of public funds to subsidize the education of K-12 students in private and religious schools.

At a time when the Governor is proposing to reduce state aid to schools by over \$1 billion dollars, and when the State budget picture appears grim for the next several years, the last thing the Legislature should even consider is a bill that will take another \$360 million dollars out of the State Treasury. Frankly, every state tax dollar is desperately needed just to keep our public schools and other essential services afloat.

So this bill makes no economic and fiscal sense. It's also bad education policy.

There are a number of significant problems with the bill that I want to draw to your attention:

- **The bill reduces aid to districts already suffering from massive cuts.** The bill cuts the full amount of per pupil state aid for any public school student leaving the district with a voucher for a private or religious school. There is no cap on the aid a district could lose, and the negative impact on affected districts and schools could be substantial, especially in high needs districts dependent on state aid.
- **There is no accountability.** The bill provides no educational accountability for the private and religious schools that accept publicly funded vouchers. While we understand that the bill has been amended to require individual voucher students to take State assessments, there is no requirement that the schools adhere to the same basic academic and performance standards that the public schools do – the very same standards which resulted in public schools being labeled “failing” under this bill. Since

we already provide public funding to private schools that offer preschool, and we require these private preschools to meet rigorous State standards, there is simply no justification for the absence of educational accountability in this bill.

- **Students already attending private schools are eligible.** At least 25% of the vouchers are reserved for students who already attend private and religious schools. This means a minimum of \$90 million in public funding will be used to underwrite the education of children who have already chosen to send their children to a private or religious school. So let's not fool ourselves: this bill is not about "school choice;" it's about subsidizing choices already made.
- **Vouchers will not help improve underperforming public schools.** The bill, while purporting to help so-called "failing schools," will actually drain students – and funding – from public schools that face significant challenges and urgently need the full support of educators, parents, community leaders and this Legislature. In addition, pulling money and students from these schools is directly at odds with the reforms put in place by the NJ Department of Education under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In addition, vouchers are not part of the reform strategies for underperforming public schools in the Race to the Top (RTTT) competition, and enactment of this bill could seriously undermine NJ's chances for an RTTT grant. Secretary Duncan won't be fooled: it's doubtful he will commit federal dollars to reform schools at the same time the State is pulling both state funding and students out of those schools.

During this time of fiscal stress, S1872 diverts funds from the public treasury to private and religious schools at the expense of the vast majority of public school students. The bill fails to apply rigorous educational standards and accountability measures to all schools receiving public dollars, and the so-called "innovations" in the bill lack evidence and credibility. ELC and OC/OS urge you to oppose this bill and demonstrate both support for public education and respect for NJ taxpayers.

Thank you for consideration of these comments.