

## New Jersey should fund public schools, not vouchers

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Patti Sapone/The Star Ledger

New Jersey Education Commissioner Bret Schundler addressed a crowd of students, parents and teachers who came to the Statehouse May 13 advocating school vouchers for disadvantaged families.

**By Calvin McKinney**

Proposals for “urban scholarships,” also known as school vouchers, are nothing new. A bill now before the Legislature calls for \$360 million for private school vouchers, targeting 36 districts, to be underwritten by a corporate tax write-off first proposed four years ago. In other words, more public money to subsidize private and religious schools at a time when Gov. Chris Christie proposes a \$1 billion reduction in funding to our public schools.

Proponents argued in 2006 that “urban scholarships” wouldn’t touch the Abbott funding, but would actually add to the pot of resources available for education. But Abbott was pushed aside by the state Supreme Court in favor of a more “equitable distribution of school funding,” based on a formula designed to address each

district's need to provide programs for poor or "at risk" students, students with disabilities, and English-language learners. Rather than fund this formula under the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA), Christie is pushing a dramatic aid cut to all districts statewide. He's also behind the voucher bill, which will only add insult to injury as districts cut teachers, guidance counselors, music teachers and after-school programs.

While voucher proponents may have the children's interest at heart, they have not used their heads to examine the facts. The voucher bill would allocate scarce taxpayer dollars to educate only a handful of students in private and religious schools, with 25 percent of the vouchers set aside for students already attending those schools. Our main concern must be with all of the students who will remain in the public schools — schools that are facing increased class sizes with teacher reduction and fewer social workers, health professionals and artistic opportunities under the governor's proposed budget cut.

While the bill allows suburban public schools to accept voucher students, the amount of the voucher — \$6,000 per pupil for an elementary student and \$9,000 per pupil for a high school student — is far below the real cost in our most successful suburban schools, which averages between \$16,000 and \$19,000. And it is highly unlikely that our pricey prep schools would accept such a paltry amount, when their tuition can exceed \$20,000.

We have to ask the question, what schools can really produce quality education for this little money? Since there are no accountability standards in the voucher bill, voucher students may well end up in private schools that do not meet the same rigorous education criteria our public schools are expected to meet. This makes no sense.

Our parents want the best for their children. It is difficult to tell a parent not to get excited when they think they see a way out of poverty and failing schools for their children. But let's tell them the truth. Only a very few will qualify for a voucher, and if they do, they may very well wind up in a poorly performing private school.

If voucher proponents are really serious about improving education for inner-city children, they should increase the amount of the voucher and require successful suburban public schools in each county to accept the voucher students. This, of course, would require busing to those schools.

But are members of the Legislature ready to make that move, which will bring many more low-income children of color into their hometowns? I think not. Lacking real political courage, the best they can do is offer a handful of children a chance to "voucher into" schools that will promise the world, but have no track record for doing any better with the children than the schools they left.

Does this scenario seem like a way to empower parents and give children hope for a brighter future through education? Or is it just another ploy to divert attention from the budget cuts that will deny every child the opportunity for a "thorough and efficient" education?

Let's fund our public schools under the SFRA formula, and leave fads and gimmicks alone. We are waiting for the true representatives of the people, including my fellow clergymen, to champion full accountability at all levels for meaningful and equitable public school reform.

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