



March 16, 2021

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families opposes HB 1371, the private school voucher bill.

We have four major concerns with this bill. Our top concern is that it contains a provision that could lead to uncontrollable and unaccountable growth in the program, placing a drain on the state budget. HB 1371 automatically increases the size of the program by 25% every year it meets its budget limits. If this provision is fully used, this \$10 million program will cost the state nearly \$100 million per year within 10 years, over \$284 million annually by year 15, and over \$867 million annually by year 20. In contrast, Arkansas's increase in much more effective public-school resources has averaged less than 2% annually over the past 5 years.

Over time, this provision will drain valuable resources away from other key priorities in the state budget for children and families, including public education, child welfare, juvenile justice, health care, pre-school education, just to name a few. This drain on the state budget becomes even more problematic given that, unlike public schools, private schools have little or no public transparency about how effectively or fairly they are educating our children. This, in turn, reduces the ability of policymakers and taxpayers to hold them accountable for how our public tax dollars are being used.

Our second concern is that this bill prioritizes an education strategy – private school vouchers – that is NOT supported by the research and evidence about what works to improve educational outcomes. Vouchers do not improve educational outcomes for students who receive them, especially for groups of students including students of color, English Language Learners, and special education students. At the same time, they lower outcomes for everyone else remaining in the public education system by draining valuable resources. We believe these resources could be better spent by allocating more money for research-based programs that we know work – out of school programs like summer programs and afterschool programs, already underfunded programs for special education students, quality pre-k, and well-qualified teachers.

Given the current COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the education system, we also question the wisdom of expanding vouchers while we are still in the middle of the crisis and have not yet assessed what our schools and students will need to recover. This is especially true for groups that anecdotal evidence suggests have lost more ground during the pandemic, including special education students, children of color, English Language Learners, and students lacking high speed online access in their homes. Until we do that assessment, expanding an unproven strategy like private school vouchers is especially problematic.

Finally, expanding the use of private school vouchers also violates a sacred principle of our constitutional obligation to educate all students – the principle of equity. Public schools have to meet the needs of all students who attend public school, regardless of their needs. Private schools are under no such obligation or duty. Under this act, for example, they are not required to follow the Americans with Disabilities Act. This allows them to use our public tax dollars to refuse services, or not provide them sufficiently, to children with special needs. This is inequitable and morally indefensible.