



April 3, 2017

Senator Roger Chamberlain, Chair, Senate Taxes Committee
Minnesota Senate
95 University Ave. W.
Minnesota Senate Bldg., Room 3225
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Senator Chamberlain,

I am writing concerning Senate File 2255. I would like to take this opportunity to voice my strong opposition to the proposal in the tax bill to fund private school tuition through vouchers.

The vote you are about to make is one that will do harm to Minnesota students. It disproportionately impacts the students we most want to help—students with disabilities, American Indian children, poor kids, English learners, and kids who are either credit deficient or behind.

Private schools can decide their admission policies and have no requirements of whom they admit. This has an especially large impact on our students requiring special education, who often have services or staffing requirements that are costly to schools. Federal law protects students in public schools from getting turned away. Public schools do the right thing and provide the resources necessary to meet an individual's needs even though they know the total costs will be under-funded and have to be made up elsewhere in the budget because state and federal funding fall short. Private schools can simply deny access to our students with disabilities. We have no way of holding private schools accountable for fairness in their admission policies.

This is true for any other discriminatory practices toward others, such as black or native students, Hispanic or immigrant children, or LGBT students or their parents. Private schools fought hard to be removed from coming under the requirements of our anti-bullying law, and we have no data to show us how they are serving all of our student groups equitably. This bill provides no way of holding private schools accountable for treating all students equally, as is required of our public schools under federal and state law.

Voucher proponents often argue that private schools serve our students better than our public schools, but there is no proof to back this up. To receive such large sums of public funding, private schools should be required to administer the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments to their students so we can evaluate the effectiveness of their education services on the same playing field as public schools. We evaluate the effectiveness of investments in other forms of choice, like charters or open enrollment choices, and we know that they don't necessarily always do better academically. Students who are given a voucher to attend a private school simply must be given the same tests as public school students so that we really know how they are doing and are held to the same academic standards.

Our constitution guarantees a "uniform system of public schools." It would be better to fully fund our public schools before providing more funding to private schools. Private schools are already well funded with public money for textbooks, nurses, counselors, transformation, Postsecondary Enrollment Options, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, ACT and federal funding, in addition to the tax break already in law for private school reimbursements.

We all care about closing achievement gaps, but we can't pretend this is good for poor kids and kids stuck in the gap. There is no evidence or real research that supports this claim. Just look to our neighbors to our east who have had vouchers for over a decade and their results for kids stuck in the gap and you will see they fair worse than Minnesota and it has left their public schools woefully under-funded and unequal.

Minnesota is a national leader in choice. We have public charter schools, magnet schools, private schools, homeschools, alternative schools, post secondary enrollment options, concurrent enrollment, tribal schools, and open enrollment to any public school of your choice.

I want to be absolutely clear: vouchers will simply not help us close the achievement gap or improve real choice for poor kids.

If this is truly about helping poor families through a tax cut, then better approaches include the child care tax credit, the working family tax credit, or some other tax targeted to help the families that really need it. Not vouchers. Take this nearly \$36 million in the 2018-2019 biennium and use it to increase the E-12 target.

I strongly urge you to vote no to undermining our public schools. The more than 90 percent of Minnesota students who attend our public schools are counting on you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brenda Cassellius". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr. Brenda Cassellius
Education Commissioner

cc: Sen. Ann Rest, Minority Lead, Senate Taxes Committee