

Subsidizing Private Education— At Taxpayer Expense

Great public schools hold students to high standards and provide programs and services to help all children meet them. They employ qualified, caring educators and provide environments in which teachers can teach, students can learn, and families and community members are engaged partners in the educational process. NEA opposes tax incentives to subsidize private education because they reduce our ability to create and sustain great public schools while providing no proven educational benefits.

— NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

Efforts to subsidize private education take a variety of forms, with the most familiar being the private school voucher that is provided directly to parents. But there are other less direct ways governments fund private education. One such method is to provide a tax credit to parents to offset their personal education expenses (education tax credit). Another is to allow individuals and corporations to reduce their tax bills by sending what they would otherwise owe in taxes to a foundation that turns the money into private school vouchers; these tax credit vouchers are often called “scholarships.” Like directly funded vouchers, these programs reduce public revenue to subsidize the cost of private education—but do nothing to improve public schools, while actually reducing the amount of money available for proven school improvement strategies.

These programs offer no proven educational benefit

First, most students whose private school tuition is defrayed by an education tax credit would have attended that private school anyway. A study of the Arizona tuition tax credit, for example, found that it was used primarily by families whose children already attended private school.¹

More importantly, tax credit vouchers have *not* been proven effective in improving the academic performance of students who use them to switch to private school. Research indicates that when student demographics are taken into account, public school students

perform as well if not better than private school students.² Students attending traditional public high schools are also just as likely to attend college as those attending private high schools.³

Those who promote these tax subsidies also claim that the risk of losing students to private school forces public schools to improve. There is no credible research supporting this alleged positive competitive impact.

Education tax subsidies do not save money

A common argument advanced in favor of education tax credits is that they would save the state money by encouraging families to switch from public schools to private ones. Actually, since tax credits are used primarily by families whose children already attend private school, these programs represent net revenue losses for states. There aren't even any savings when students switch from public school to private school because districts cannot reduce their fixed costs—maintenance, utilities, debt service, transportation, etc.—in proportion to the number of students who leave. Rather than save money, school districts must make do with less.

A nationally recognized economic consulting firm determined that a proposed tuition tax credit program would harm public schools and their employees, local taxpayers who would have to make up any funding shortfall resulting from reduced state expenditures and federal aid, and public school students, who would attend less well-funded schools or have to travel to distant public schools after closer schools closed due to declining enrollment and funding.⁴

Tax subsidies for private education are fiscally inequitable

As with most tax cuts, the financial benefits of education tax subsidies accrue primarily to the wealthy. In the case of an education tax credit, the financial benefits are enjoyed only by families that can afford to pay tuition and then later reduce their tax bill by all or some of their costs. The fiscal benefits of tax credit vouchers are also enjoyed primarily by those who can afford to make donations to foundations that will use the money to grant vouchers. This program also treats donations to these foundations more generously than the tax code treats donations to other charitable organizations. Individuals and corporations receive dollar-for-dollar credits against their tax bills for contributions to voucher foundations. Other charitable donations merely reduce the income on which one's tax bill is calculated.

To make the proposals politically palatable and less vulnerable to legal challenge, proponents often include in their proposals credits for public school expenses or contributions to public school extracurricular funds. Because families in less affluent communities cannot afford to make donations to their children's schools, the benefits of public school tax credits accrue primarily to wealthy school districts, increasing the disparities between rich and poor neighborhoods.⁵ The inclusion of provisions aimed at public school parents is more about making the proposals *appear* equitable than about actually providing public schools with equitable funding.

Education tax subsidies represent bad tax policy

Government provides public services for the benefit of all members of society. Taxpayers may not choose which of these services their tax dollars will support,

and which they'd prefer not to fund. Taxpayers who buy books, for example, should not receive a tax rebate for not patronizing the public library. Nor should taxpayers who prefer country clubs to public golf courses receive rebates to compensate them for the additional cost of that private choice. Likewise, taxpayers who choose to send their children to private school should not receive tax refunds to pay the tuition.

These various tax subsidies increase the complexity of an already complex tax system. In order to claim an education tax credit, taxpayers must retain and submit receipts for all claimed education expenses. To minimize the risk of fraud in a tax credit voucher program, the state Department of Revenue would have to compare the contributions that taxpayers claim they made to voucher foundations with the receipts reported by those groups, and also confirm that the donations were used to fund vouchers that were actually used in eligible schools. In Arizona, the chief economist for the state Department of Revenue warned that the program contained "lots of possibilities for abuse."⁶

Public schools need proven reform strategies, not unproven schemes

Tax credit vouchers and education tax credits are just the latest in a long list of schemes that have diverted attention from what our children and our schools really need—programs and funding to recruit, train, and retain the best teachers; smaller classes so they can devote enough attention to each child; high-quality early childhood education programs so children come to school ready to learn; tutoring to ensure that those who fall behind aren't left behind, and the active involvement of parents and the community. All students deserve the right to a great public school, and it is with these kinds of investments—not education tax subsidies—that we will achieve this goal.

References

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³ "Are Private High Schools Better Academically Than Public High Schools?" Harold Wenglinsky, Center on Education Policy, October 2007, www.cep-dc.org.

⁴ Financial and Economic Impacts of Utah's Proposed Tuition Tax Credit Legislation, Price Waterhouse Coopers, January 2004.

⁵ Ibid. See also, "A Model to Avoid: Arizona's Tuition Tax Credit Law," People For the American Way, September 2001.

⁶ Karina Bland, "School Tax Credits Wide Open to Abuse: Millions Are Diverted from Needy Students," Arizona Republic, April 9, 2000.

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