

August 6, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leader McCarthy,

As you consider legislation to address the COVID-19 pandemic, the undersigned secular organizations urge you to ensure that any pandemic relief package does not include provisions that would divert funding from public schools that serve all children to private, religious schools that serve only a select few. We use the term *school voucher* herein to describe any policy that would have such an impact, regardless of the mechanism used to distribute the funds.

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States requires governmental neutrality between religions—and between religion and nonreligion. This separation of church and state is a bedrock element of our religious freedom. To uphold religious freedom, the United States must reject taxpayer funding of religious instruction of school children.

The organizations that comprise our coalition work to support separation of church and state by advocating for the full equality of nonreligious people. Genuine religious freedom can only be realized when the civic benefits and responsibilities of governance apply to every person regardless of their religion or lack thereof. Lawmakers need to be aware that the nonreligious are a substantial, rapidly growing segment of the U.S. population. In 2018, the religiously unaffiliated became the single largest “religious” survey bloc in the adult population of the United States. According to the federally funded General Social Survey, adults in the United States who choose no religious preference made up 23.1 percent of the population in 2018, up from nine percent in 1994.¹ Maintaining secular public schools is a priority policy issue for these constituents. In a recent survey of 33,897 nonreligious individuals, more than half (51.9 percent) identified maintaining secular public schools as a key priority for the United States.²

¹ https://gssdataexplorer.norc.umd.edu/trends/Religion%20&%20Spirituality?measure=relig_rec

² Frazer, S., A. El-Shafei, A.M. Gill. 2020. *Reality Check: Being Nonreligious in America*. Cranford,

Public schools already face immense, unprecedented challenges in educating students during the pandemic. It is now all but certain that the public health risks posed by COVID-19 will persist through the fall semester, if not the entire 2020–2021 school year. The mission of public schools to provide a quality secular education to all students without discrimination remains crucial, and they can only fulfil that mission with public support. The pandemic has been and continues to be enormously disruptive to school planning, budgeting, and operations.

In this environment, the logistical challenges of providing a safe and healthy education setting will require historic levels of effort and ingenuity. In addition to the direct costs of providing an education while maintaining social distancing, masking, and related hygiene practices, school budgets are suffering from revenue losses associated with the economic recession caused by COVID-19. While many private schools are facing similar challenges, they are permitted to seek private, commercial, and charitable sources of funding that are not available to the public schools that educate 90 percent of children in the United States today. For example, private schools received billions of dollars in taxpayer funding through the Paycheck Protection Program, which was unavailable to public schools.

The novel coronavirus does not discriminate in whom it infects, but many private schools *do* discriminate when selecting children they choose to educate as well as who they hire to teach. In the 2017–2018 school year (the most recent for which data are available), 78 percent of private school students attended a school with a religious mission.³ It is impossible to fund private schools without directly funding religious programming.

Unlike public schools, private schools are not subject to various federal anti-discrimination protections. Private religious schools are explicit about their intent to discriminate in the education of children on the basis of religion—both the child’s parent’s religion and the religion of school trustees and shareholders. Many religious schools also discriminate against other protected categories, including class, sex, and disability. In diverting funding from the public school system to private, largely religious schools, vouchers favor the education of a chosen few children over the education of them all.

In addition to favoring religion over nonreligion, vouchers are simply bad policy. They do not succeed in improving educational outcomes. Numerous studies of voucher programs in various localities have demonstrated that children who accept a voucher fall behind their non-vouchered peers in mathematics performance. Most studies also fail to demonstrate an improvement in

NJ: American Atheists. Available at www.secularsurvey.org.

³ National Center for Education Statistics. “Number and percentage distribution of private schools, students, and full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers, by religious or nonsectarian orientation of school: United States, 2017–18.” Department of Education. Accessed August 4, 2020 at <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss/tables/TABLE02fl1718.asp>.

reading performance for children who accept vouchers.⁴ There may be myriad ways to improve educational outcomes, but vouchers are not one of them.

Coronavirus relief legislation must not include private school vouchers or any voucher-like policy that would divert desperately needed funding from our country's public schools to private, largely religious schools. Public dollars belong in public schools. Thank you for your attention to this letter and for your leadership in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sincerely,

American Atheists
American Humanist Association
Center for Inquiry
Freedom From Religion Foundation
Secular Coalition for America

⁴ See, for example, Austin, Megan, R. Joseph Waddington, and Mark Berends. 2019. "Voucher Pathways and Student Achievement in Indiana's Choice Scholarship Program. Accessed August 4, 2020 at <https://www.rsjournal.org/content/rsfjss/5/3/20.full.pdf>. This and several other studies are compiled by the National Coalition for Public Education at <https://www.ncpecoalition.org/studies>.