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## Legislature Should Reject Proposed “Opportunity Scholarship Act”

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By Charles Wowkanech

On April 13th, hundreds of college students at Rutgers, William Paterson University and other institutions will be joined by labor union members and other community organizations to protest against cuts to education. The theme of the protest is “Take Class Action!” and New Jersey’s labor movement stands with these students to oppose cuts to higher education and reductions to elementary and high school education through vouchers.

For this reason, we were pleased to see several leaders in the New Jersey Assembly announce this week that they had serious concerns and would halt the advancement of the so-called “Opportunity Scholarship Act,” which would establish a voucher program. This misleadingly titled bill is bad for students and bad for taxpayers. The proposed “Opportunity Scholarship Act” is an opportunity the Legislature should reject.

In regard to vouchers, one thing is clear: the recent campaigns in New Jersey and other states to create school voucher programs are misguided efforts that will only make education worse for the children they are supposed to help. Why? Because voucher programs take money out of the public school system and put it into private schools. Furthermore, there is limited accountability for the institutions benefiting from voucher funds. In fact, overall academic results from private schools do not have to be reported.

The New Jersey voucher bill disguises the cost to the taxpayer by creating a funding “swap” that allows corporations to redirect tax dollars, that would otherwise be paid to the state, to fund voucher programs instead. Let’s not be fooled: Corporate tax dollars that are “redirected” come out of the state budget just as directly as if they were regular tax dollars coming out of the state treasury.

The “Opportunity Scholarship Act” would give corporations dollar-for-dollar matching tax credits for their contributions to the program, which would divert an estimated \$840 million over the next five years from public to private and parochial schools in 13 of the state’s largest urban school districts.

Cutting aid to the public schools that need it most is an “opportunity” we should avoid, especially when the state’s failure to fully fund its school aid formula has already been criticized by a court appointed Special Master and the issue is once again back before the state Supreme Court.

Furthermore, study after study has failed to demonstrate that voucher programs improve educational opportunities for the students who participate. Research studies by the University of Indiana and the University of Illinois that examined voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland and Washington, D.C., showed that students in voucher programs did not do much better on state exams. Those studies do not measure the impact of parental involvement or the bias effect created by comparing private and parochial schools that are free to select the best students with public schools that have a responsibility to educate all students.

New Jersey residents understand this. Opposition to school voucher programs is significant. In public opinion polls a majority of New Jersey’ residents oppose them, the most recent poll being from the prestigious Rutgers University Eagleton Institute of Politics, published last week.

Our public schools are already among the best in the nation. Our students test scores are at the top of every national exam and we are in the top three states for the percentage of high school graduates who go on to college. Although we can constantly be further improving our public schools, we should be proud of these rankings. We need to build up our public education system, not tear it down.

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