Testimony of Susan Spicka, Executive Director, Education Voters of PA
Education and Workforce Committee field hearing
"More Choices, Brighter Futures: Expanding Education Freedom"
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Northampton Community College, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

Thank you very much for inviting me to provide this testimony. My name is Susan Spicka, and I am the executive director of Education Voters of Pennsylvania, the organization whose views I am representing today.

Pennsylvania invests heavily in providing families with choice outside of public-school districts with mixed results in terms of student achievement. Taxpayers spend around $3.3 billion annually on tuition to 14 cyber charter and 160 brick-and-mortar charter schools that enroll over 135,000 students.[1] An additional $575 million is allocated annually to private school tax credit vouchers funded by the state. Cyber charters perform poorly and have extremely low graduation rates, brick-and-mortar quality varies, and state law prohibits collecting achievement data for private schools that receive tax credit vouchers, so we have no idea what quality education students who attend these receive.[2]

School districts also operate more than 80 career and technical centers that educate over 76,000 students.[3] These are very successful programs, however many have wait lists because public school districts lack adequate funding to meet student demand.[4]

The question at hand today is what additional opportunities would the federal vouchers create and who would benefit from this program, which the US Treasury estimates will cost a staggering $26 billion annually by 2030?

First, we need to be clear that if voucher dollars go to private schools, families will have increased choice ***only*** if private schools choose to enroll their children. Proposed regulations have clarified that states will

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[1] Pennsylvania Department of Education, "Types of Schools", Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Accessed October 10th, 2026. https://www.pa.gov/agencies/education/resources/types-of-schools
[2] Susan Spicka, "According to Their Records: The Full Picture", Education Voters of Pennsylvania, July 2nd, 2026. https://edvoterspa.org/2026/07/according-to-their-records-the-full-picture/ and Pennsylvania Independent Fiscal Office, "Pennsylvania Educational Tax Credits- An Evaluation of Program Performance", Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, January 2022, page 30. https://www.ifo.state.pa.us/getfile.cfm?file=Resources/Documents/TC_2022_Educational_Tax_Credits.pdf&view=true
[3] Pennsylvania Department of Education, "Career and Technical Education", Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, accessed October 10th 2026. https://www.pa.gov/agencies/education/programs-and-services/instruction/career-and-technical-education and "Career and Technical Education: Investing in Pennsylvania's Future", Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, April 2026. https://www.papartnerships.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/PPC-CTE-Fact-Sheet-April-2026.pdf
[4] "Career and Technical Education: Investing in Pennsylvania's Future", Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, April 2026. https://www.papartnerships.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/PPC-CTE-Fact-Sheet-April-2026.pdf

have no ability to prohibit private and religious schools from discriminating against students because of the way they learn, who they love, how they worship, and the list goes on.

Some have suggested that federal voucher dollars could be used to support public schools. However, recent regulations omit what constitutes eligible expenses, so it is not yet clear how or ***even if*** voucher dollars could reach public schools.

And the law is clear on this: voucher dollars must be allocated to individual students to pay specific fees. Public school districts cannot use voucher funding to pay for teachers, programs, or services that their schools offer to all students at no cost.

Further, the structure of this program ensures that even if funds are allowed to reach public schools, the benefits, especially for students in rural and not wealthy areas, would be minimal.

I am a trustee on my school district foundation board in Shippensburg where the median family income is $70,810.[5] Because individuals would need to earn about $85,000 to have a $1700 federal tax liability to direct to an SGO to support our district, we would have a small pool of individuals in our community who would have this tax liability to divert to support our local students.

And while individuals outside of our school district could contribute to an SGO that would support our local students, a Brookings Institution analysis finds that this would deviate from typical giving patterns and it would be unrealistic for school districts to plan for this at scale.[6]

Our district intentionally charges very few fees so that students' educational experiences are not based on their families' ability to pay. As a result, the benefit of federal vouchers would be small. And because none of the voucher funding could be used to support our district budget, including the substantial staff time that would be involved with administering the program, federal vouchers would likely be a net negative for the district.

If public school districts create fee-for-service programs, student access to educational opportunities will depend on an SGO's ability to raise offsetting funds. For example, if a school district creates a program and charges families for afterschool tutoring and the SGO fails to raise enough money to pay the fees of all students, voucher funds will cover fees for only some families, effectively rationing access by lottery. This practice is not only morally wrong, it could also violate the 2023 Commonwealth Court ruling that declared education a fundamental right under Pennsylvania's constitution.[7]

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[5] "Shippensburg Area School District, PA", Census Reporter, Accessed October 10th 2026. https://censusreporter.org/profiles/97000US4221570-shippensburg-area-school-district-pa/

[6] Jon Valant, Sonika Harish, Margo Pedersen, and Nicolas Zerbino "Who is likely to benefit from the Federal Scholarship Tax Credit?", Brookings Institution, September 23rd 2026, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/who-is-likely-to-benefit-from-the-federal-scholarship-tax-credit/

[7] "William Penn School District et al. v. Pa. Dept. of Education et al., 294 A.3d 537, 962 (Pa. Commonw. Ct. 2023)", Education Law Center News Room, accessed October 20th 2026. https://www.elc-pa.org/cases/william-penn-sd-et-al-v-pa-dept-of-education-et-al-pa-commonwealth-court-2018/

Jon Valant, director of the Brown Center on Education Policy, recently called this program "Title 1 for rich kids."[8] This is exactly how we should expect a federal tax credit voucher program to function.

Proposed regulations will allow existing scholarship organizations that support private schools and have decades of experience to open bank accounts and use their advanced marketing skills and lists of wealthy donors —parents, alumni networks, lists of church congregation members, etc. — to collect federal voucher funding. Newly-established scholarship granting organizations that are trying to raise funding for nonprofits that provide after school care or that want to support public schools will be like little league players thrown into a Major League game. They will struggle to compete to get donations from wealthy individuals who have a $1700 federal tax liability, especially in areas where this donor base is limited or where existing private school scholarship organizations have saturated the spaces.

And because the law allows families making up to 300% of an area's median income to participate in the program, we will see all but the wealthiest families receiving funding from this program.[9] According to Ed Choice, in Northampton County, a family of four that makes up to $313,000 would be eligible to receive vouchers. These could pay for their children's private school tuition bills, $85/hour private tutors, and more.

Vouchers given to wealthy families won't create more opportunities or choices for most students, they will simply put money in the pockets of people who already have a lot.

I think that we can all probably agree that what most parents want is to be able to send their children to a high-quality neighborhood school that will provide them with the real-world skills they need to be successful after graduation.

The federal voucher program will not bring Pennsylvania closer to achieving this goal for most families in the commonwealth. If policymakers in Washington, D.C. have $26 billion to spend on the education of our nation's students, they should invest these dollars in Title I and IDEA, which are programs that target funding to support students who need the most and that have a proven track record of success in improving student outcomes.

Thank you.

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[8] Jon Valant, "Title I for rich kids' and other predictions for the Federal Scholarship Tax Credit", Brookings, October 13th 2026. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/title-i-for-rich-kids-and-other-predictions-for-the-federal-scholarship-tax-credit/

[9] Drew Catt, "Updated Eligibility Income Limits for Scholarship Recipients for the New Federal Tax Credit for Scholarships", Ed Choice, May 21st 2026. https://www.edchoice.org/2026-updated-eligibility-income-limits/