

Attn: Jennifer Bell-Ellwanger

ID: LFG-2017-0023

U.S. Department of Education

400 Maryland Ave. SW, Room 6W231

Washington, DC 20202

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Sent via: Electronic mail

November 30th, 2017

Re: Secretary's Proposed Supplemental Priorities and Definitions for Discretionary Grant Programs RIN 1894-AA09/ Docket ID ED-2017-OS-0078

Ms. Jennifer Bell-Ellwanger,

I am sending you this communication because I am in opposition to Proposed Priority 1 of the Secretary's Proposed Supplemental Priorities for Discretionary Grant Programs.¹ A coalition of over 50 different organization also sent a letter to the United States Department of Education regarding this issue in opposition as to the Secretary's Proposed Supplemental Priorities and Definitions for Discretionary Grant Programs RIN 1894-AA09/ Docket ID ED-2017-OS-0078.² I take their same stance on this issue and I am in opposition as to the Secretary's Proposed Supplemental Priorities and Definitions for Discretionary Grant Programs RIN 1894-AA09/ Docket ID ED-2017-OS-0078. In this letter to you, I am going to focus on some of the reasons why I am against the Secretary's Proposed Supplemental Priorities and Definitions for Discretionary Grant Programs.

I do not believe that the United States Department of Education should reward the States of the United States for adopting voucher programs that do not serve all students, fail to improve academic achievement, undermine public education funding, harm religious freedom and lack critical accountability for taxpayers. I believe that the United States Department of Education should instead have a first priority as to funding, supporting, and strengthening our public schools, where 90% of students in the United States attend. I do not believe that voucher programs for private educational institutions will ensure equal access for all students. I hope that you understand that private schools that accept vouchers are allowed to reject students for a variety of reasons, including that a student has disabilities, is an English Learner (EL), is not academically performing at grade-level, identifies as a member of the LGBT community, practices a different religion, or needs transportation due to large distances between home and the student's school. For example, the Government Accountability Office did a study and they found from every single one of the voucher programs across the United States, that only four of the voucher programs required private educational institutions to accept all students that used the vouchers.³ Other voucher programs the study has found allowed private educational

¹ A coalition of over 5 different organizations that are with the National Coalition for Public Education have on November 13th, 2017 sent your office a letter also in opposition to Proposed Priority 1 of the Secretary's Proposed Supplemental Priorities for Discretionary Grant Programs.

² <https://americanhumanist.org/news/coalition-opposes-ed-department-school-voucher-program/>

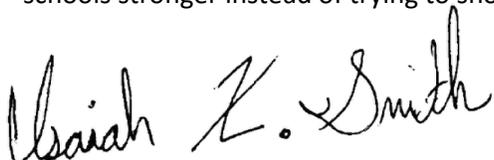
³ 8 U.S. Gov't Accountability Office, GAO-16-712, Private School Choice Programs Are Growing and Can Complicate Providing Certain Federally Funded Services to Eligible Students 27 (2016).

institutions to discriminate against students by denying the students access to the private educational institution, such as by admission or grant preference, to certain students for many reasons including disciplinary history, academic achievement, religious affiliation or even due to the student's LGBT status. This certainly is not equal access for all students at private educational institutions.

Since your department's vouchers for private educational institutions do not mandate equal access for all of their students, it should be known that private school vouchers do not adequately mandate service for the most vulnerable students. For example, the private school vouchers often fail to serve students that live in poverty, or that are of color, or that have a disability. The private school vouchers often fail to serve English-learners, and students who are underperforming. By the United States Department of Education awarding grants to states to encourage private school voucher programs, this move will not increase then possibility that all students will receive a better education or more educational resources. This move by the United States Department of Education will be the harm the very same population of students Proposed Priority 1 is intended to benefit.

White my letter to you is not going to list all of the reasons why I am against Secretary's Proposed Supplemental Priorities and Definitions for Discretionary Grant Programs RIN 1894-AA09/ Docket ID ED-2017-OS-0078, however all of the reasons that have been listed in the November 13th, 2017 letter by the Coalition of 50 organization is the same stance that I have as to this issue.⁴ Therefore any arguments or additional reasons that I have not listed in my letter to you, please include their reasons as my reasons as well to your office as to why I am in opposition of the Secretary's Proposed Supplemental Priorities and Definitions for Discretionary Grant Programs RIN 1894-AA09/ Docket ID ED-2017-OS-0078.

In conclusion, Secretary Betsy DeVos's Proposed Priority 1 to maximize access to private school vouchers and other "educational choice" undermines the United States Department of Education's commitment to providing high-quality education to students. Private school vouchers do not ensure equal access to education and do not serve the students most in need of educational opportunities. Instead, vouchers divert desperately-needed resources away from the public schools, which accept and serve all students. I, like the coalition of over 50 different organizations, believe that the United States Department of Education should not reward states for adopting voucher programs that fail students, parents, and the taxpayers. The government would better serve our posterity by using the funds to make our public schools stronger instead of trying to show favoritism to private educational institutions.


Respectfully,

Isaiah X. Smith⁵

⁴ <http://americanhumanist.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2017-11-01-NCPE-Comments-on-Supplemental-Discretionary-Priorities-FINAL.pdf>

⁵ www.isaiahxsmith.com