



Testimony on Senate Bill 47

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon on Senate Bill 47. My name is Sujith Cherukumilli and I am the Legislative and Research Analyst at the Southern Education Foundation here in Atlanta. I am here today to voice my organization's opposition to Senate Bill 47, and will focus my testimony on the following topics: academic outcomes, accountability for taxpayer dollars, and federal protections for students.

First, we don't know if this program is actually effective, so we shouldn't continue to pour money into it.

In Georgia, the existing GSNS report does not meaningfully disaggregate academic performance by race, gender, or socioeconomic status, so we have no way of knowing if this program is actually helping our kids. It offers no comparison of how students performed in their public school versus how they are performing in their private school. In other instances, limited to no evidence of effectiveness would constitute a reason for limiting or discontinuing a program. The GSNS shouldn't be any different.

Second, the proposed legislation is redundant, and funnels taxpayer dollars to unaccountable and unregulated private schools.

As you know, the cost of the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship has grown by around 600 percent since the scholarship's passage in 2007 and implementation in 2008. In 2019, the scholarship cost the state nearly \$33 million to administer, and the cost is likely to grow as the scholarship's scope and scale expand. Expanding the program's eligibility to include more students, alongside two other voucher bills proposed by the General Assembly, will surely result in the diversion of more taxpayer dollars to private schools during a time where the state is experiencing deep cuts to public education and failing to fund public education fairly. We can and must do better for our students. Additionally, private schools participating in the GSNS program do not need to be accredited by a licensed accreditation agency, leaving the door open for our most vulnerable students to attend schools and be taught by educators that are not up to the standards we should expect from a Georgia education. Accreditation, accountability, and transparency should be a requirement, NOT an option, for schools accepting taxpayer dollars.

Third, students with IEPs who receive a scholarship under the GSNS waive their federally-guaranteed protections under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Passage of SB47 would subject students with 504s to the same waiving of their federal rights under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Existing reports for the GSNS do not show whether students are actually receiving their accommodations at their private school. The GSNS also creates the potential for families to have to pay a significant amount out-of-pocket to educate their children at private schools – for tuition, services and transportation. We should invest in ensuring that public schools have the funding they need to educate each child – no matter their disability, exceptionality, or health condition. Georgia students deserve nothing less.

I will end with this: more equitable pathways than the one you propose are certainly possible and highly encouraged. We urge you to not move this bill forward and to instead fully fund public education in a

way that will truly grant *all* students in the state the opportunity to excel and meet the challenges and demands to ensure Georgia can compete in a 21st century global economy. Thank you.