



Testimony on Senate Bill 386

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TESTIMONY BEGINS BELOW

Chairman Martin and esteemed members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning on Senate Bill 386, the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship. My name is Sujith Cherukumilli and I am the Legislative and Research Analyst at the Southern Education Foundation here in Downtown Atlanta. I am here today to voice my organization's opposition to Senate Bill 386, and will focus my testimony on the following topics: academic outcomes, accountability for taxpayer dollars, and the troubling history of school privatization in Georgia.

First, I would like to remind the Committee that the vast majority of research shows no academic benefits for students who use vouchers to attend private schools.

A review of the most comprehensive forms of school vouchers has proven this time and again. At best, states with similar programs, including here in Georgia, experience stagnant outcomes for voucher recipients while public school districts experience disinvestment despite the fact that fixed costs remain the same even though voucher students leave the public school system. Worse, however, are negative trends manifesting in states that have tried similar experiments. States that have implemented similar voucher and tax-credit scholarship programs of their own, such as Indiana and Louisiana, have seen negative effects on student achievement for students ~~children~~ who participate in these voucher programs. Students participating in the Louisiana Scholarship Program increased their chances of failing

math assessments by 50 percent. Students in Indiana using vouchers to attend private schools consistently scored lower on both reading AND math assessments than their public school peers. In many cases, vouchers either fail to narrow and even widen opportunity and achievement gaps for students of color, low-income students, and students with disabilities. One crystal clear fact is evident in the data we've seen on vouchers so far – in their lifespan to date, private school voucher programs in any form have overwhelmingly failed to produce results and, in many cases, widened long-standing opportunity and achievement gaps between different groups of students.

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. Most recently, in 2019, the scholarship cost the state nearly \$33 million in lost revenue. According to estimates from the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, expansion of the scholarship would redirect \$74 million from public to private schools within the first two years of its implementation. Expanding the program's eligibility to include more students will surely result in the diversion of more taxpayer dollars to private schools during a time where the state consistently fails to update the QBE to what it costs to educate students in the 21st century.

Furthermore, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act already entitles students with disabilities to a **protected** education at a private school of their choice with the full cost of tuition covered if their neighborhood public school is unable to meet their specific needs. Any scholarship operated under the provisions of SB10 and SB386 would not only force participating children to forgo a free education for a subsidized one, but it would also strip children of their federally-guaranteed civil rights protections.

Additionally, private schools do not face the same reporting, accountability, and performance requirements as public schools, nor do they have to adhere to the same requirements for transparency of open meetings and records laws. SEF believes that accountability and evaluation should be a requirement, NOT an option, for schools accepting taxpayer dollars.

Third – the troubling history of educational choice in Georgia makes vouchers an inherently inequitable means for improving the education system.

The origins of vouchers in Georgia can be traced back to the era of *Brown v. Board of Education*, at the peak of the fight to desegregate schools. Fueled by the state's first school voucher law, enacted in 1961, private school enrollment in Georgia spiked by 181 percent between 1950 and 1975. In 1962, Georgia spent over \$218,000 to finance the scholarships of more than 1,500 students in private schools, nearly 100 percent of whom were white. The consequences of this historic resistance to desegregation through the use of vouchers have been dire – in 2014, Georgia was only one of THREE states nationwide with more than 45 districts with open desegregation orders. In a state with such a rich history of civil rights, is this the legacy we want to be remembered for and continue to perpetuate?

I will end with this: the Southern Education Foundation believes that instead of sending taxpayer dollars toward a redundant program with no proven results, directing state investment toward improving services for special education students, low-income students, and other disadvantaged student subgroups will help more students realize significant short- and long-term gains. 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.