Oral Testimony from Augustus Mays, Vice President of Partnerships & Engagement, EdTrust

Raising the Alarm: How the National School Voucher Program Will Be Harmful to Students

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Thank you to Senator Hirono and members of the Senate Democratic Caucus for the invitation to speak here today.

My name is Augustus Mays, vice president of partnerships & engagement at EdTrust, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to dismantling racial and economic inequities in education. Over the past year, EdTrust has worked nationally and within states to encourage opposition to the Federal Voucher Tax Credit. Our conclusion is clear: this is not free money or a targeted investment in students with the greatest needs. It is an uncapped federal tax subsidy that steers public resources toward private education with few safeguards.

Beginning in 2027, taxpayers may receive a dollar-for-dollar federal tax credit of up to $1,700 for contributions to scholarship-granting organizations, or SGOs, which can fund private school tuition. Every dollar claimed is federal revenue unavailable for public schools or other essential services.

That structure raises three fundamental questions for policymakers, families, and taxpayers alike: Who benefits? Who is protected? And who is accountable? The FVTC falls short on each.

First, the FVTC is poorly targeted. Roughly 90% of families may qualify, including households earning about half a million dollars in some communities. In Arkansas, 95% of voucher recipients had not previously attended public schools. In Arizona, 71% of students using education savings accounts in 2023 were already in private school or home school.

So, instead of expanding opportunity for students, taxpayers will subsidize choices many affluent families have already made.

Second, a voucher does not guarantee access — or quality. Students do not simply choose a private school — private schools choose their students. Unlike public schools, private schools are not bound by the same civil rights protections or IDEA obligations. As a result, they may deny admission or necessary supports to students with disabilities, multilingual learners, LGBTQ+ students, or students with disciplinary histories.

In Wisconsin, for example, parents of children with sensory needs were reportedly turned away from a private school because of those needs, and reporting indicates that several private schools in the state maintain similar policies. These families' experiences expose the false promise of the FVTC: A voucher may help a family pay tuition, but it does not guarantee that a private school will accept, accommodate, or support their child.

And even when students gain admission to a private school, a voucher does not guarantee a better education. Research on voucher programs in Louisiana, Ohio, Indiana, and Washington, D.C., found that students who used vouchers to transfer to private schools experienced significant losses in math and reading achievement. In Louisiana, the negative impacts on student learning were larger than the size of academic losses caused by Hurricane Katrina or the COVID-19 pandemic.

Third, the program lacks meaningful public accountability. SGOs meet minimal federal requirements, but states have little authority to add protections, prioritize students with the greatest needs, or require consistent measures of academic quality. Yet states will bear the cost and risk of monitoring fraud and abuse. The public will lack clear answers about who benefits or whether students are learning.

Arizona offers a warning about both misuse and mismanagement. State prosecutors allege that two out-of-state individuals obtained more than $110,000 in voucher funds by applying for 50 children — 43 of whom did not even exist — and spent the money on personal expenses. Meanwhile, the state's universal voucher program cost $738 million in fiscal year 2024, while public schools received, on average, $300,000 less in state funding, while continuing to serve 92% of Arizona's students. Weak oversight enabled alleged fraud, while runaway costs left taxpayers and public schoolsholding the bag.

Congress must repeal the Federal Voucher Tax Credit program — which Senators Hirono and Kelly propose to do in their legislation, the Keep Public Funds in Public Schools Act. Rather than funneling public dollars into private, exclusionary institutions, we must invest these billions of dollars back into our public education system, explicitly targeting the students who are most underserved.

Thank you for your time, and I welcome your questions.