

Pell Grants for Kids

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Witness:

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Superintendent

Testimony

Chairman Alexander, Senator Dodd and members of the committee, my name is Robert Smith and I am the superintendent of the Arlington County Public Schools in Virginia. The Arlington Public Schools enrolls approximately 19,000 wonderfully diverse students across 31 schools and a number of special programs. Among these 19,000 students, there is no majority ethnic group, with 43% white, 32% Hispanic, 14% African-American and 10% Asian. About 40% of these students speak a first language other than English, representing 79 different languages and 99 different nationalities. Approximately one-quarter of our student body receives English for Speakers of Other Languages services and about 37% receive reduced or free meals.

I am also here today representing the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and the Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS) of which I am a member. Both organizations oppose the use of vouchers as envisioned in this proposal. For example, the Virginia group's legislative position states: "VASS absolutely opposes tuition tax credits and any form of public money going to private schools, under any name, such as vouchers, certificates, scholarships or portable entitlements."

Pell Grant for Kids as Voucher

Chairman Alexander's proposal clearly represents a voucher of \$500 that parents could use at private or public schools. If families choose to send their children to the public schools, the proposed vouchers would not be needed. If families spend their vouchers with private schools, it raises questions regarding the appropriateness of using federal funding for private schools, precluding increasing the funds for current federal educational initiatives, siphoning funds from current federal educational initiatives, and the accountability of federal dollars flowing to private schools. Additionally, voters around the country have proven that they do not support the use of public dollars for vouchers by a two to one margin. This was seen most recently in both Michigan and California.

Public schools are accountable for every dollar spent, including an increased accountability to the federal government through No Child Left Behind. Most of my colleagues and I oppose the use of federal dollars in the form of vouchers, believing such use would represent an inappropriate use of federal funds, would spend federal funds without adequate accountability and would divert desperately needed dollars from our public schools.

Funding Priorities

Currently, Congress does not pay for all of its funding commitments. It would be irresponsible to introduce a new program with a cost of up to \$15 billion a year, when it is not funding other priorities such as special education and No Child Left Behind. In the area of special education, Congress promised back in 1975 that it would pay for 40 percent of the national average per pupil expenditure for every child in special education. Today, Congress only funds the program at only 18.65 percent. In the upcoming school year, districts and states across the country, including ours, will have to cover an \$11 billion federal shortfall. We are thankful at this time that all members of Congress have pledged to meet the 40 percent commitment; however at the rate of the recent \$1 billion increases, Congress will never meet that commitment. The addition of a new federal program that will cost billions of dollars per year will only prevent Congress' ability to fulfill its promise in special education.

In Arlington, we budgeted for next school year slightly over \$37.3 million dollars on special education. We received \$3.4 million dollars or 10.6% of that total from the federal government under IDEA. We received \$4.3 million dollars under NCLB, but as the result of additional requirements of that legislation Arlington Public Schools had to budget an additional \$1.1 million in local dollars to meet additional testing, record keeping and transportation requirements. In total, we expect to receive a total of about \$13.5 million dollars in federal funds, or about 3.8% of our total budget for the upcoming year. If additional federal dollars become available, we would much rather receive them for under-funded or unfunded federal mandates than for vouchers.

Program Feasibility

If Arlington were to receive the proposed vouchers based on this proposal, our district would find it difficult to deal with the instability of funding from year to year. There would be no guarantee that the same number of parents would use the dollars each year for their public schools. If parents determine where to spend their dollars at the beginning of June and school districts will not get the dollars until August, local budgeting would be uncertain at best. The budget for Arlington Public Schools is adopted in the spring of the preceding year. In addition, it would be difficult to hire teachers and get new student programming into place all in time for the start of the school year. Adding an unknown number of dollars late in the summer would prevent any careful planning as to how to expend the new dollars.

Conclusion

In closing, vouchers are not an effective expenditure of federal dollars as the Pell Grants for Kids suggests. Instead, Congress should stick to fulfilling the funding promises already made in areas such as IDEA and NCLB before branching out to new programs. We must ensure we are providing the necessary resources to ensure that we provide America's public education students with the tools they need to succeed in life.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today.