

**Testimony of Education Voters of Pennsylvania**

**Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee**

**Submitted by Susan Spicka, Executive Director**

**March 5, 2024**

Hello and thank you very much for inviting me to testify today.

Education Voters of Pennsylvania, founded in 2007, is the commonwealth’s only statewide nonpartisan, nonprofit public school policy and advocacy organization.  We engage parents, stakeholders, and community members in every corner of the commonwealth with public events, research, social and print media, and advocacy training.  Ed Voters educates and trains supporters, creates opportunities for action, and works to build statewide support for a truly equitable public education for all Pennsylvania students.

In his budget address, Governor Shapiro said, “It’s ridiculous that here in Pennsylvania two women can get married on a Sunday and fired from their job on a Monday, just because they’re in love.”

What Governor Shapiro left out is that the children of this couple could get kicked out of their private school on Tuesday. And that tax dollars are used to support this discrimination.

Discrimination is a feature, not a bug, of school voucher programs. Pennsylvania’s Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) and Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit (OSTC) school voucher programs direct $470 million tax dollars into private and religious schools that can, and do, explicitly discriminate against students for just about any reason they choose.

The words “private school” evoke an image of ivy-covered college prep schools. And Pennsylvania certainly has plenty of these, especially in Philadelphia, the collar counties, and other urban and suburban areas.

Today I would like to provide you with a window into a different kind of private school that vouchers fund in Pennsylvania.  These are religious schools, which in many regions of the state, are often the only option for families other than their local public schools.

And I want to make it very clear that there is no way for lawmakers to pick and choose to fund only one type of private school with tax dollars. Voucher dollars support all private and religious schools in the commonwealth.

School vouchers are historically deeply rooted in segregation. Today they are deeply woven into the MAGA and M4L agenda. Vouchers fund bigotry and advance the agenda of Christian nationalists to undermine public education and our democracy.

[A report Ed Voters wrote last year](https://edvoterspa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/EDVO_VOUCHER_REPORT_Dec2023.pdf) documents that voucher schools can and do expel students who become pregnant or refuse to attend Christian pregnancy counseling, as evidenced by this policy from the Archbishop Wood High School in Warminster, which states,

“*The school principal will attempt to handle each matter in a spirit of Christian compassion and forgiveness, but when public scandal, the student’s refusal or failure to participate in counseling or other circumstance warrants, the school principal may dismiss or take other appropriate action.”*

Voucher schools expel students who have had an abortion as we see in this policy from the Harrisburg Diocese, which states,

“In keeping with the Church's laws and teachings concerning human life, any student who promotes, procures, actively assists, or performs an abortion shall be dismissed unless the Principal, after examining all aspects of the case, in consultation with the Secretary for Education, determines that there are mitigating circumstances.”

Voucher schools can and do refuse to admit students who have disabilities. Take, for example, the Al Aqsa Academy in Philadelphia, which has this statement on its website:

*“The Academy is not equipped for teaching students that might need special education or might have behavior problems. Students in need of special care are referred by parents or school personnel to the local public school district."*

Voucher schools can and do refuse to admit students based on their religion. For example the Linville Hill Christian School in Lancaster County requires on its application for admission that *“One or both parents are born again Christians.”*

Voucher schools can and do expel students for being LGBTQ+ or simply for being supportive of people in the LGBTQ+ community, as we see in this policy from a school in Lancaster County.

“Thus, DAYSPRING CHRISTIAN ACADEMY retains the right to refuse enrollment to or to expel any student who engages in sexual immorality, including any student who professes to be homosexual/bisexual/transgender or is a practicing homosexual/bisexual/transgender, as well as any student who condones, supports, or otherwise promotes such practices (Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:27).”

The Dayspring Christian Academy, which has received $3.4 million in voucher funding through EITC/OSTC since 2014, is bringing in Tucker Carlson as the keynote speaker for their annual fundraiser on April 20th. This is the same Tucker Carlson who openly defends authoritarianism and recently said, [“Leadership requires killing people, sorry.”](https://newrepublic.com/post/179085/tucker-carlson-explains-putin-interview-alexei-navalny)

This fundraiser is an event that has been historically attended by students.

This leads us to the issue of what religious voucher schools teach students.

In Pennsylvania, religious schools do not have to be accredited or abide by meaningful curriculum standards.

In a forthcoming report, the Keystone Research Center does a deep dive into the curricula that is taught in voucher schools in the commonwealth. The report finds that some religious schools have curricula similar to public schools. But a significant number teach creationism as science and present the Bible as literal truth in history and other subjects.

One example is the 148 Pennsylvania schools in the Association of Christian Schools International (ASCI) (a SO that received about $9 million in OSTC and EITC dollars in 2022-23). ACSI describes its schools as having “the highest belief in biblical accuracy in scientific and historical matters.”

Examples of the publishers used in religious voucher schools in Pennsylvania include Bob Jones University Press, A Beka Book, and Accelerated Christian Education (ACE).  These publishing houses were founded in the 1970s by fundamentalist Baptist curriculum providers who rejected the concept of secular education. Below are teachings from current books being used in Pennsylvania’s religious voucher schools.

* Environmentalism is presented as a religion in conflict with Christianity. Climate change is dismissed as either not scientific or not necessarily caused by human activity. There are references to positive effects of climate change such as opening up the Arctic for oil exploration.[[1]](#footnote-1)
* History textbooks are grounded in a literal reading of the Bible as a timeline of human history, identifying races and nations by their biblical role.  Africans are described as descending from Noah’s son Ham.  The narrative of the “curse of Ham” historically used to provide biblical justification for slavery and segregation, is still present in both A Beka and BJU Press textbooks.[[2]](#footnote-2)
* The hardships of slavery are downplayed. Slavery and the treatment of Native Americans were supposedly mitigated by their conversion to Christianity.
* Capitalism is promoted as biblically mandated. Recessions and economic problems are portrayed as the result of government interference, labor unions, taxes, and regulating agencies, including the FDA and EPA.[[3]](#footnote-3)

And the list goes on and on in the report.

We know from [study after study from other states](https://time.com/6272666/school-voucher-programs-hurt-students/) that vouchers have a catastrophically negative impact on student academic achievement.

We know that vouchers fund bigotry and discrimination.

We know that vouchers strengthen Christian nationalism and weaken democracy.

**Private school voucher programs that give tax dollars directly to families, such as the PASS or ESA programs that have been proposed in Harrisburg, are very dangerous.**

Limited voucher programs such as these can be expanded with the stroke of a pen in the future to strip out accountability and include universal eligibility, exploding costs for taxpayers, gutting funding for public schools, and creating endless opportunities for waste, fraud, and abuse. We only need to look at what is happening in  [Ohio](https://www.cleveland.com/news/2024/02/private-school-vouchers-program-balloons-from-24000-to-82000-students-and-counting-after-legislative-expansion.html), [Arizona](https://www.12news.com/article/news/local/arizona/superintendent-horne-report-on-school-voucher-program-budget-impact-esa/75-8e6fe2e9-4147-4a3c-af8f-82009115ef9a#:~:text=The%20law%20was%20originally%20estimated,state%20enrollment%20figures%20and%20projections.), [Florida](https://www.tampabay.com/news/education/2023/10/06/vouchers-benefit-existing-private-school-students-most/), [Iowa](https://www.thegazette.com/state-government/two-thirds-of-iowa-students-receiving-new-private-school-scholarships-already-attended-private-schoo/), and other states to understand what we will eventually face in Pennsylvania if a new voucher program such as the proposed PASS or ESA voucher program is enacted.

And the pressure from school privatization organizations on lawmakers to expand an existing voucher program that gives money directly to families will be exponentially stronger than the current pressure you are experiencing to implement one in the first place.

We are deeply grateful that House Democrats have been the firewall that has protected the Commonwealth from the implementation of a new school voucher program.

We most strongly urge you to stand your ground on this issue and continue to reject any new voucher proposal in these budget negotiations and to instead ensure that every new dollar invested in education in the 2024-2025 state budget will be invested public schools that will educate every student who walks through their doors using academic standards set by the state.

I would also like to address the issue of funding for cyber charter schools.  Governor Shapiro’s proposal to enact a flat rate of $8000 for regular education tuition to cyber charter schools would be a game changer for school districts. Based on districts’ 2021-2022 expenditures, this would save districts more than $260 million.

Moving forward, a flat rate for regular education cyber charter students would help control cyber charter school costs. Without a flat rate, a substantial portion of any new state funding that districts receive will simply pass through to cyber charters, increasing their bloat and waste and severely diminishing the value of the investment that the commonwealth would be making into increasing resources for students in our local schools.

We hope you will strongly support the $8000/student flat rate in this budget and urge you to continue to pursuing funding reforms that will better align special education tuition rates with the cyber charters’ actual costs of services for students with disabilities.

The $8000/student flat rate will not affect cyber charters’ ability to educate students. Cyber charter schools are awash in excess funding from school districts and the evidence is in plain sight. Cybers will be able to easily absorb a reduction in tuition, especially since they will be able to continue reaping a huge profit from the special education tuition they receive.

[In a report from June 2023](https://www.childrenfirstpa.org/report/quarter-billion-dollar-cyber-surplus/), Children First documented that Pennsylvania’s cyber charters are sitting on a surplus of $250 million–a quarter of a billion dollars! The report found that the surplus is large and growing and uncapped and unregulated, which has led to staggeringly excessive reserves at many schools.

[Commonwealth Charter Academy’s  990 from 2022](https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/743068519) form shows that CCA had revenue of $397 million, expenses of $274 million and a net income of $122 million. In addition, a lookback at their previous 990 forms shows that CCA’s net assets have grown from $30 million in 2018 to more than $305 million in 2022.

And CCA is building a real estate empire in every corner of the commonwealth at warp speed using our property taxes and to my knowledge, no one in Harrisburg has a handle on this. For example, a [building that is under construction in Shippensburg](https://edvoterspa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/CCA-building-plan-image.jpeg), which will have more than 100 parking spaces,  is owned by Perini Services, Inc., which is in Lauderdale by the Sea, Florida.

How many hundreds of millions of property tax dollars has CCA spent on buildings like this one that are owned by out-of-state corporations? We simply do not know because no entity in Harrisburg–not the legislature; not the Department of Education, which authorizes the cybers; and not the Auditor General’s office–is ensuring any meaningful transparency or accountability for more than $1 billion that school districts pay cyber charters using primarily property taxes that they collect from their local communities.

We deeply appreciate House Democrats’ strong support of the funding and accountability reforms for cyber charter schools in House Bill 1422 and most strongly urge you to make the $8000/regular education cyber charter student flat tuition rate a priority in budget negotiations this year. We also urge you to continue in your efforts to ensure accountability and transparency for the more than $1 billion that cyber charter schools spend each year.

Thank you again for inviting this testimony.

Susan Spicka

Executive Director, Education Voters of PA

1. *Earth Science*, 5th ed. (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2018), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *World History,* 5th ed. (Greenville, SC; BJU Press, 2019), 16-18. and *World History and Cultures in Christian Perspective*, 3rd ed. (Pensacola, FL: A Beka Book, 2010), 2-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A Beka’s *Economics: Work & Prosperity in Christian Perspective*, closes with a narrative titled “Killing the Goose that Lays the Golden Eggs” about an imaginary company destroyed by taxes, labor unions, OSHA, and nondiscrimination laws. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)