

**AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT
SCHOOLS**

PRESS RELEASE 467

**EROSION OF PUBLIC EDUCATION:
GONSKI'S VOUCHER SYSTEM**

10 April 2012

The Gonski Report 's recommendation of a basic payment for students in all schools, public and private, is a version of the voucher system. This system effectively undermines both the separation of religion and the state and our systems of public education.

If there is

- no effective enrolment policy which opens all school dependent upon public funding to *all* students - with opportunities for all and offence (religious or otherwise) to none

or even

- an effective 'Needs' policy which ceases State Aid to wealthy religious schools,

The Gonski's voucher system will lead to privatisation of our systems of public education.

Australia needs to reject any version of the voucher system in the interests of both public education and freedom of conscience. To date those who value the separation of religion and the State in America through the First Amendment (on which Section 116 of the Australian Constitutions is based) have battled against the voucher system. The following report from Ed Doerr in *The Voice of Reason: The Journal of Americans for Religious Liberty* 2012, No. 1 [118] p. 8 indicates the state of play on the voucher system in that country. Australia should follow their example in resisting all suggestions of a voucher system.

The Voucher Watch: An Indiana judge upheld the state's new school voucher law on January 13. Marion County Superior Court Judge Michael Keele dismissed the primary question of whether public funds can go to private religious schools, which are 98% of the schools participating in the so-called "Choice Scholarship Program." He said the funding was indirect, even though the Indiana Constitution bans all forms of aid to religion.

A group of citizens with support from the National Education Association's Indiana affiliate filed suit after the program went into effect in July. Nate Schnellenberger, president of the Indiana State Teachers Association, told *Education Week*, "The state tries to make a case the money is not going directly to a religious institution because of the way our voucher law is constructed....But if we follow the trail of the money, it goes from state to parent to religious institution. Virtually all of the students using vouchers are enrolled in religious schools."

Schnellenberger said the ruling will be appealed.

In the first semester of the program, 3,919 students participated, and almost all of them attended faith-based schools. The first year cap was limited to 7,500 students, so only about half of those eligible enrolled.

The cap next year is 15,000 but the cap will be lifted in 2013-14. The program has numerous problems aside from the constitutional question. Journalist Jaelyn Zubrzycki observed in *Education Week Online*,

"Opponents of the program question whether the private schools are really an

option for all students. Private schools are able to select the students who attend their schools, and can ask students who do not meet behavioral or academic standards to leave....The situation is particularly knotty for special needs students; currently, there is no special needs voucher program, and students with certain disabilities who enrol in private schools sometimes need services provided only at public schools."

Zubrzycki added that the program may have national consequences.

"It is the only active voucher program in the country that is not limited to low-income students or students who have attended a low-performing school, and the only one with no eventual cap on enrolment."

About 20,000 more students participated in state voucher or tax credit programs in 2011-12 than in the previous year, according to the pro-voucher Alliance for School Choice Yearbook 2011-12. Nationwide, 210,524 students were enrolled in the 2011-12 school year compared to 190,811 in 2010-11, an increase of 10.3%. Nearly half of the students lived in Florida (60,859) or Pennsylvania (40,876).

Arizona ranked third with 30,178, followed by Ohio (23,975) and Wisconsin (23,426). Georgia placed sixth with 11,096, followed by seventh place Iowa (10,820). Other states include Indiana (4,509), Louisiana (2,034), Utah (635), Rhode Island (341) and Oklahoma (160). There were also 1,615 students in the District of Columbia voucher program. Of the active programs, 15 were vouchers and 10 were tax credits. North Carolina adopted a tuition tax credit program for children with disabilities, providing up to \$6,000 depending on family tax liability.

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