

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

PRESS RELEASE 547#

AMERICAN CHURCH SCHOOLS PUSHING FOR TAXPAYER FUNDS – WILL THEY BE SUCCESSFUL?

The American Catholic hierarchy claims it is cash-strapped. As in Australia in the 1960s, they are seeking a taxpayer-financed bailout of its troubled private school system. In 1960, in the US, 5.2 million youngsters attended approximately 13,000 Catholic schools. Today those numbers are 2.3 million students in 7,500 schools.

Eager to stop the freefall, the bishops have always lobbied for handouts from the taxpayers. Until recently, the American politicians, backed up by the First Amendment and the Supreme Court, have resisted them. (See Rob Boston, ‘Challenging the ‘School Choice’ Charade’, *Church and State*, March 2014 at <https://www.au.org/church-state/march-2014-church-state/featured/challenging-the-school-choice-charade>.

It is later than you might think. On January 28 2014 legislative proposals unveiled by U.S. Senators Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) and Tim Scott (R-S.C.) were startling in their scope.

The Alexander proposal would take \$24 billion in public funds – nearly two-thirds of all the money the federal government spends on secondary education annually – and pour it into a block-grant program for the states. The states would in turn use the money to fashion voucher programs. Families meeting certain income requirements would receive about \$2,000 to apply toward private-school tuition.

The Scott bill would create a voucher program under the Individuals with Disabilities Act aimed at disabled students, give vouchers to students from military families and expand Washington, D.C.’s controversial voucher program.

Australia has already been down this road. Entanglement of Church and State in education leads back into our pre-Enlightenment history of political and social division and strife - and has nothing to do with education or the common good.

Wrong Way. Go Back.

The following is an article from the online magazine of Americans United for Separation of Church and State which gives the details of American

developments. <https://www.au.org/church-state/march-2014-church-state/featured/challenging-the-school-choice-charade>

Church & State

Challenging The ‘School Choice’ Charade

Americans United And Allies Debunk The Claims Of Voucher Proponents

March 2014

Featured

By [Rob Boston](#)

The legislative proposals unveiled by U.S. Sens. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) and Tim Scott (R-S.C.) Jan. 28 were startling in their scope.

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Alexander and Scott didn’t just wake up that morning and decide to drop the bills. The introduction of Alexander’s “Scholarship for Kids Act” (S. 1968) and Scott’s “Creating Hope and Opportunity for Individuals and Communities through Education Act” (S. 1909) was timed to coincide with “National School Choice Week,” an annual event sponsored by a coalition of groups working to make Americans comfortable with the idea of privatizing secondary education.

While some of the organizations and individuals backing the week are primarily interested in things like charter schools and public school choice, the big money and the big push comes from organizations that support vouchers. These include the Heritage Foundation, the Koch Brothers’ American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and Amway heiress Betsy DeVos’ Americans for School Choice.

National School Choice Week has become a major propaganda vehicle for groups favoring school privatization as well as their allies in the fundamentalist Christian community and the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

Each faction brings its own agenda to the table. Groups like Heritage and ALEC loath public education precisely because it is public. In their extreme free-market vision, all government services must be opposed whether they are effective or not.

The Catholic hierarchy is essentially seeking a taxpayer-financed bailout of its troubled private school system. Statistics tell the story: In 1960, 5.2 million youngsters attended approximately 13,000 Catholic schools. Today, those numbers are 2.3 million students in 7,500 schools. Eager to stop the freefall, the bishops have for years lobbied for handouts from the taxpayers.

Fundamentalist Protestants have long opposed public education because it is legally secular. They call the schools “godless” and want to supplant the system with vouchers for fundamentalist academies and home-schooling.

Backers of National School Choice Week, which ran Jan. 26-Feb. 1, claimed they would host more than 5,500 events. They trumpeted endorsements by politicians and public figures and planned a social media blitz. (There was even a “National School Choice Week Dance,” although a video promoting it pointed out that the artist whose music they used – singer Taio Cruz – “does not endorse National School Choice Week or its views.”)

Americans United, working through the National Coalition for Public Education (NCPE), decided to celebrate National School Choice Week, too – but in a different way. Instead of hip-hop videos, AU and its allies released a dose of good, old-fashioned facts to counter voucher proponents’ claims.

As AU noted on its website, voucher backers have one goal: “Shifting as many tax resources as possible from the public school system, which serves 90 percent of America’s schoolchildren, to private academies that play by their own rules and aren’t accountable to the taxpayer.”

The NCPE is a coalition of more than 50 public policy, education and religious organizations that support public education and oppose vouchers. Members include: African American Ministers in Action, American Association of University Women, Anti-Defamation League, Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, Hindu American Foundation, the NAACP, National Parent Teacher Association, National School Boards Association, School Social Work Association of America and the Union for Reform Judaism.

AU, which co-chairs NCPE alongside the American Association of School Administrators, created a special section of its website called “VoucherFAIL” that included links to various resources visitors could use to learn the truth about vouchers.

The site pointed out that several studies have shown that vouchers do not improve student academic performance. It noted that many fly-by-night schools have been created to collect tax payments through vouchers and pointed out that private schools are often loosely regulated, if at all. They retain the right to deny admission to or expel certain students, they can decline to offer special-education services and they can fire LGBT teachers and staff.

Polls, the site noted, show strong opposition to vouchers. A recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll found opposition to vouchers at 70 percent – an all-time high. In addition, voters have defeated tax aid to religious schools in ballot referenda 24 times since 1967, often by decisive margins.

Members of the NCPE used a special hashtag – #voucherFAIL – to spread messages and share useful links. Material was also made available via Facebook. In addition, Americans

United Web Manager Tim Ritz and others created clever anti-voucher memes that activists could post on Facebook and other forums. The memes were collected in a Tumblr at voucherfail.tumblr.com.

AU and its allies didn't overlook traditional media. AU Legislative Director Maggie Garrett joined with Sasha Pudelski, associate director of policy and advocacy at the American Association of School Administrators, to pen an opinion column that unmasked National School Choice Week for what it really is: an opportunity to promote vouchers.

The piece appeared in *Politico*, a popular Washington, D.C., daily that focuses on political issues.

“We recognize that private school vouchers, whether in the form of direct aid, tax-credits, education savings accounts or other vehicles, divert desperately needed resources away from public schools to fund the education of a select group of voucher students,” wrote Garrett and Pudelski. “They undermine the vital function of educating all students while providing no real impact on student academic achievement.”

Garrett and Pudelski also took aim at one of the voucher boosters' most oft-heard claims: that vouchers will help low-income families.

“Because voucher payments often do not cover the entire cost of tuition or other mandatory fees for private schools, only families with the money to cover the cost of the rest of the tuition, uniforms, transportation and other supplies can use the vouchers,” noted Garrett and Pudelski. “In Cleveland, the majority of families who were granted a voucher but did not use it, cited the additional costs as the reason.”

Garrett told *Church & State* that the Alexander bill is a good example of how vouchers fail poor families. The legislation would offer vouchers worth at most \$2,100. Yet tuition at a non-sectarian private academy can easily run five or six times as much per year. (Most of these schools, which tend to cater to the wealthy, aren't interested in accepting low-income voucher students anyway.)

Could that money get a needy child into a Catholic school? Not likely. Even the Center for Education Reform, a pro-voucher group, notes that the average Catholic school charges about \$6,000 per year.

Some fundamentalist Christian academies do charge less, but they also offer a dogma-laden curriculum that often ignores modern science and elevates an extreme far-right worldview over educational quality.

“Too often ‘school choice’ is a euphemism for vouchers,” Garrett said. “Vouchers represent a direct attack on the church-state wall and the very existence of public education, a system that educates the vast majority of our nation's children.”

Concluded Garrett, “Americans have rejected the false choice of vouchers. I urge everyone to let their legislators know that they favor church-state separation and want their tax money to support non-sectarian public schools that serve all youngsters.”

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