

Maine Atheist Freethinker and Humanist Association

Maine Chapter - Freedom from Religion Foundation

May 7, 2023

Members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

This is testimony AGAINST LD 338, LD 1741, LD 1798, LD 1838, LD 1841, and LD 1860, each of which would create a private school voucher program that funds private school education. These bills should be rejected not only because voucher efficacy is controversial, but because they have no accountability measures, fail to serve rural students, fund discrimination, and violate religious freedom. They are weapons used to attack public education and should be defeated. Public dollars should fund public schools.

Regarding efficacy, the record of private school vouchers is mixed at best, with various studies claiming a wide spectrum of results. With such a record, there is no justification for funneling money into vouchers.

Regarding accountability, only one of the bills proposes oversight and accountability for the private schools that take public money. That one bill requires an assessment test, but not following the same standards as public schools. This would make it impossible to determine what effect the use of a voucher has on student achievement. Only two of the bills require that the fund be audited, and the bills lack any accountability at all for appropriate spending, thus leaving the door open to fraud.

In rural areas, where there are few private schools if any, students would have few or zero options. Even if there were a choice, those rural students would generally face long, costly commutes which would affect participation and achievement. The use of vouchers is also damaging to rural public school systems in other ways. The school's total state funding would decrease while costs would stay constant. Plus, state funding would decrease as it is diverted from those districts to pay for voucher students in more urban areas.

Public schools must serve all students. Private schools don't follow federal civil rights laws that apply to public schools and often discriminate against certain students based on their religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc. Taxpayer funded vouchers should not fund such discrimination at private schools, yet these bills contain nothing to protect Maine's students from such discrimination.

Many students would be at risk. Students with disabilities who use a voucher would forfeit many of the protections provided to students under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) because they are considered parentally placed in private schools and lose the quality and quantity of services available to students in public schools. Private schools can (and have) allowed the schools to deny admission or expel LGBTQ students, and have called being gay or transgender a "biblical sin." Students who are secular or belong to religious minorities are also often

Maine Atheist Freethinker and Humanist Association

Maine Chapter - Freedom from Religion Foundation

discriminated against because many schools impose a religious litmus test on students and their families.

Voucher programs around the country primarily fund religious schools, and there is no reason to believe these vouchers would be different. Yet, one of the most fundamental principles of religious liberty is that government should not compel any citizen to pay for someone else's religious education. Passing these bills would send money to religious schools in violation of this core religious freedom protection.

For all the above reasons plus a desire to support public education for all, we oppose LD 338, LD 1741, LD 1798, LD 1838, LD 1841, and LD 1860. Please vote "Ought Not To Pass" and support public education.