

Bleckley County Schools

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*The Best Little School District in Georgia!*TM

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To the Taxpayers of Georgia:

The push to expand vouchers has reached an unprecedented level in Georgia, with both houses of the General Assembly expected to vote on similar bills as early as this week. I am disappointed but not surprised that some of our elected officials are using the pandemic to further their agenda to weaken public education in our great state.

Let's be honest about what these bills do. Both HB60 and SB47 allow parents to take the state funding for their children and apply that towards private school tuition in the form of a voucher. Similarly, there is a movement to allow parents to put those funds in an education savings account ("ESA") for educational purposes. On the surface, these measures appear noble because they help students leave failing schools to improve their future. We hear the example of the Dekalb County mom who cannot afford to move, and her children are stuck in a failing school with no options. Unfortunately, a voucher that provides at most one-half the cost of private school tuition does that mom no good. If she cannot afford to move, then she surely cannot afford the remainder of the tuition or even the transportation costs to get her children to private school every day. So who really benefits from these vouchers? Could such legislation actually benefit the friends and supporters of the legislators who draft these bills?

If that mom could move to Decatur City or Forsyth County, her children could attend public school at no cost, and the state funds would follow the children. So it makes sense that allowing the state funds to follow the children to private school should not affect public schools, right? Wrong! Both Decatur City Schools and Forsyth County Schools are held to the same financial, legal, and accreditation requirements as Dekalb County Schools. Private schools are not required to undergo audits, adhere to a myriad of state and federal laws, or receive accreditation from AdvancEd. Furthermore, the proposed vouchers and ESAs would be allowed with little to no strings attached.

We regularly tell our legislators and stakeholders that we will gladly compete with any private school, charter school, or virtual school as long as we have a level playing field. In other words, as long as everyone adheres to the same rules and regulations, we welcome the competition. Our small district with only 2,570 students must complete the same reports and adhere to the same rules as Gwinnett County Schools and its 186,993 students. While the easy answer appears to remove the burden from small school districts, the federal requirements on states prevent such a move.

I have also heard some legislators remark that school systems are suddenly flush with cash, and they have excessive reserves. First, I am grateful that Governor Kemp and the Georgia Legislature have approved the

FY21 Amended Budget, which restored 60% of the Amended Formula Adjustment (“Austerity”) that was initially proposed. Please understand that this budget and next year’s proposed budget still withhold funding in the form of austerity cuts. Most districts have adequate cash at their fiscal year-end of June 30 because they have received 95% of their local property taxes. The best snapshot of financial strength would be October 31, a point where many school districts have expended excess cash reserves, and some even need to borrow money to meet their November payrolls.

Many districts suffered tremendously during the Great Recession, and as a result, became much more fiscally conservative. As a result, these districts began building reserves to avoid layoffs and furloughs in anticipation of the next recession. These same legislators who criticized school districts for failing to have adequate reserves to weather the storms of business cycles now criticize districts for being good stewards of the taxpayers’ money and building reserves. Some of us have amassed what may appear to be excessive reserves, including my district. However, we are undergoing a pretty large building project that we can only afford once a decade, and we will use a portion of those reserves to cover what debt, state, and ESPLOST do not cover. Simply passing judgment on a reserve balance without understanding the rest of the story reeks of political gamesmanship.

We are also grateful to the federal government for CARES and CARES II funds, but understand that the allocation of those funds is not equitable. For instance, we are receiving approximately \$1,077 per FTE in CARES and CARES II funds. Screven County Schools is receiving approximately \$2,243 per FTE, while Forsyth County Schools is receiving approximately \$148 per FTE. Those of you who know me would be somewhat surprised that I would provide such information because I am usually one of the loudest voices decrying the inequity in funding rural school districts like mine. However, I know that Forsyth County Schools has incurred much more than \$148 per student just in cleaning, disinfecting, and sanitizing costs, not to mention the costs associated with serving students virtually during shutdowns and quarantines.

I want the public and our legislators to know that any attempt to move money from public schools is an affront to parents and stakeholders who support public education. To attempt to move these funds at a time when the state is not even fully funding public education is an insult. To grant anyone state funds without adequate accountability is reckless, and as a Georgia taxpayer, I consider the effort to approach political malpractice.

I invite you to spend a day at Bleckley County Schools and see what dedicated teachers, administrators, and support staff do on a given day to help students succeed. While I maintain that we in Bleckley County do the most with the least, our story is not unique. Every single day in public schools across Georgia, you will find that same devotion to excellence. Most teachers want to be the teacher of the year, and I believe no one wants to be labeled a failing teacher or a failing school. I challenge every legislator to work just one day after the session ends as a substitute teacher in your nearest public school. I know I speak for all superintendents when I say we definitely need the subs and would love to have you join us.

I strongly urge every taxpayer to contact his/her legislator and oppose HB60, SB47, and ESAs unless and until strong accountability measures are added, and public education is fully funded. A strong public education system is vital to our great state's continued growth and prosperity, so let’s all actively oppose efforts to weaken or dismantle public education in Georgia.

Sincerely,



Dr. Steve J. Smith
Superintendent

