

Today I write about House Bill 1532 which has passed the house and is coming to the Senate. This bill is most likely known to you all as the private school “voucher” bill. I ask that you consider voting **red** on this bill.

I have a unique position where my son attended a local private school, and I currently am employed by Dickinson Public Schools (DPS). I feel that having been on both sides of the Bill, once as a parent of private education and currently an employee of public education, provides me opportunities to see through both lenses.

I want to first start by saying that financially I thought this would be great for my husband and me as private school parents. Private school is only getting more expensive, but class sizes are staying small, which was one of the huge draws to private education in the first place. After three years in a private school, my family has ended our private-school journey and started our public-school journey. There are a few things worth noting that I feel speak to the flaws in this Bill as it is currently written.

I do not wish to imply my son is perfect. He is “all boy,” which at times is difficult, to say the least. My son has struggled since preschool with self-regulation, sensory issues, and impulse control. He has problems with boundaries and understanding what appropriate behavior is and what is not in the classroom and out. This is something we, his parents, have been aware of and worked on for years. We genuinely believed the small class sizes and faith-based education offered at private schools would help to give him the best chance at success academically and emotionally.

I work in groups in the public-school setting at DPS that talk about emotional regulation and ways to assist children with coping skills. My family had assumed this was also happening at the private school and at a greater level. Some of the tools and procedures we put in place included text message check-ins between his teacher and us on a weekly basis; and hiring an Occupational Therapist to come into his classroom to assist with emotional regulation, impulse control, and understanding proper boundaries. After two years of this and thousands of dollars on top of tuition, we were no closer to helping him than where we started. It was at the point where our son spent his days going to the private school and within the first couple of hours being sent to the office to do his work for the remainder of his school day. He was secluded in a conference room and provided workbooks and assignment sheets to complete.

I started to listen more and ask DPS staff who oversee our procedures on self-regulation and found that there was quite a bit supports and processes that are done at DPS that were not an option at the private school he attended. I was confused. We were paying thousands of dollars every year to ensure a great education was taking place and with smaller class sizes the private school would have the advantage. We thought we were doing everything the correct way, but now feel we were wrong in assuming this.

The public school system has a legal responsibility to take all students, no matter where they are academically and emotionally. This, coupled with a belief in the DPS vision “Success for All,” DPS is prioritizing this simple equation and meeting every student where they are. This could mean providing specialist services, sensory rooms, one-on-one paraprofessionals, the school within a school, tutoring, additional evaluations and assessments, and so many other things. In the end, these supports are focused on building a healthy understanding and sturdy relationship foundation with each student that walks in the door, as they have with my son. Dickinson Public Schools operates on public funding that has regulations and rules that require the District to meet students where they are when they enroll and help them succeed no matter their circumstances, which ensures that each child has a chance for an equal and fair education. When we move away from this and are allowed to turn away students that would cost us more time or money, such as in private education, that is when we lose the chance to change a child’s future.

There is an expectation the private school experience would understand and be willing to reach deeper into their toolbox. Unfortunately, that is not what happened. Instead, the private school stated their school was not a “good fit” and that with a class of sixteen, it was not feasible to stop and connect with my child in his time of emotional de-regulation. That is the time he needs them the most. The private school did not have the services that Dickinson Public School has. This was surprising, and upsetting, and left us wondering how without warning we were going to tell our nine-year-old that the only school he has known would no longer be his school, and not by his parent’s choice. I do think it is worth noting that after the private school administration spoke to us about our experience, they states to not only my husband and myself, but our son as well, that he could return to the private school once he is “good” and has “matured” a bit.

Over the last month, I have examined how our family ended up here. DPS has the resources in place that our funding has allowed because of the rules and regulations tied to it. This has also raised the bar to better equip us to help students at all levels. In no way am I implying that private schools do not meet student’s needs and that our family would never choose a private school again, but I am saying that private schools are not held accountable to meet student’s needs. This means that private schools are not required to offer services or to accept students that would not be a “good fit.” I am happy to report that even though our private school journey was forced to end against our wishes, our public-school journey so far has been one that has my son’s spark is starting to shine once again. In his new environment in the public school, my son is being seen, heard, and supported in ways that we could not imagine, even in a class of twenty-eight.

I run the financials for Dickinson Public Schools, and when reading and reflecting on other ways the legislature can help families have a choice in education without the cost being an issue, some considerations are suggesting that private schools use their Federal Title dollar allocations to divert and to free up current Title expenses being paid with their general fund dollars. Some private schools do not utilize Federal Title dollars due to their values or beliefs and the fact that rules and regulations that follow those dollars are not hoops they see worth

jumping through. This would free up funds in their budget and allow for them to offer students who may otherwise not be able to pay the steep tuition, the chance to attend private schools. Another item to consider is income tax relief to free up family's dollars to go toward private education. Currently, the bill has funds going directly to schools and not the families they are supposed to be giving the choice to. By having dollars go directly to schools and not families, without the language in the Bill prohibiting schools that receive these dollars from increasing tuition, there is a chance that the tuition will not be lowered for the families the dollars were intended to help. These are some ideas for diverting dollars from places where regulations and rules need not follow the dollars.

I have done a bit of research on voucher Bills in other states and have attached a comparison chart to this email for you to review as well. The chart displays that in most states that have voucher programs the primary eligibility requirement to receive the voucher is one or a combination of the following: that the student is on an IEP (has a disability), the student qualifies as low income under the Free and Reduced Lunch federal program thresholds, the student's family is at a certain percentage of the national poverty level, and the student resides in a school district that does not maintain a public school with the student's grade level. I could not find a state on the list that has an "open door" policy without any true regulations or rules to follow for public dollars to go to private schools like how this Bill is written.

I ask that all Senators please look at the attached document showing other state's voucher Bill language or at least amend this Bill to not have public dollars be given out without first calling for a study group to understand how voucher Bills work in other state's without assuming it works the way that this Bill is currently written. It is a fact that all families this Bill is supposed to assist, would in turn most likely not help them, because a growing population of students are coming from low-income families, have learning disabilities, struggle with emotional deregulation, and other academic and emotional lagging skills, which private schools would be able to deny these students enrollment under the current provisions of the bill.

In conclusion, as the voucher Bill is currently written, I will admit that I am confused as to what is the purpose of this House Bill. Is it to give the freedom of education choice to all families? If so, then it will need to have provisions that all families truly have the choice to attend a private school and that the private school would not have the choice on whom they will accept and not accept. Is the bill meant to help children that come from disadvantaged families or have severe disabilities attend a private school? If so, there are no provisions in the Bill stating that a child that meets certain poverty levels or is on an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and has identified disabilities would be eligible for private school voucher dollars if they qualify. I am a proponent of private education and a family's right to choose what education setting is best for their child, but I am not a proponent of public dollars not having rules and regulations tied to them, which ensures that all the public's best interest is at heart and not just some of the public.

Again, I ask that you please consider voting **red, do not pass**, on House Bill 1532. Thank you for your time, and please do not hesitate to reach out to me if you have any questions or concerns.

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