



UPDATE ON VOUCHERS LEGISLATION PENDING IN THE GEORGIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY; BILLS PASS HOUSE AND SENATE COMMITTEE BY THE NARROWEST OF MARGINS

RESPONSE TO REP. WES CANTRELL'S LETTER TO EDUCATORS

Many of our members have written the House and Senate Education Committees and their own legislators about HB 60 and SB 47, bills to create new and expanded programs to spend taxpayer money on private school education.

Some of them have received a form letter from the sponsor of the bill, State Rep. Wes Cantrell of Cherokee County challenging what he calls "inaccuracies in some of your letters."

GAE wanted to clear the record on the sponsor's points (**in bold.**)

Representative Cantrell writes: **Schools had been fully funded for a couple of years for the first time in history up until the pandemic....**

Don't those words--"fully funded for a couple of years for the first time in history"--say enough about the status of public-school funding in Georgia? In fact, public education in Georgia has been underfunded by \$10.2 billion since 2003. A whole generation of students, parents, schools, and educators has lived through years of austerity cuts that were never restored and during which time teachers were furloughed, class sizes were increased, and classes and programs were eliminated.

Representative Cantrell continues: **"We restored 60% of that cut last week which led to the \$383 million number in the email. However, the Cares Act gave Georgia public schools \$412 million which they could use at their discretion so QBE was actually overfunded by \$30 million. This fact is conveniently left out of the email."**

The facts: Adjustments to the current school-year budget resulted in almost \$400 million in budget cuts to public education, this year alone. As previously noted, budget cuts since 2003 have stripped public education and the QBE funding formula by \$10.2 billion. A pending bill would cut education funding by an additional \$300 million.

CARES Act (The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act) funding is limited to the coverage of new expenses arising from new costs associated with COVID-19 and may not be used for any new, non-COVID-related programs or purposes. CARE dollars, allocated according to Title I formulas, helped pay for summer-time meal programs and such things as plexiglass barriers, face masks, and specialized cleaning supplies.

CARES Act money was also used to avoid COVID-related furloughs of teachers and other in-school personnel and to address technology and the lack of broadband access in

under-served areas of the state as well as training teachers for teaching online during the pandemic.

To say that public schools are, as a result, overfunded is factually untrue.

“Fully funding QBE” does not mean our public schools are “adequately” funded at all.

It merely means money was put into the various QBE categories, whether that money sufficiently covers school district expenses or not.

For example, in 1991, the state funded 54% of schools’ transportation costs (bus purchases, maintenance, repair, and fuel). Today, the state funds about 14% of those same costs, which are approaching \$1 trillion a year. This year, in its mid-year adjustments, the state found money for about 500 new school buses --which GAE applauds--, but that found money only begins to address the safety concerns posed by an aging fleet as a quarter of all school buses have been in service for more than 15 years.

Of course, Georgia requires districts to provide transportation to all students who live more than a mile-and-a-half from their schools and for all special education students, yet legislators say that QBE/public schools are “fully funded.”

Later in his response to educators’ letters and emails in opposition, Representative Cantrell states that public school districts will reap a \$3,800 profit per student should the bill pass. We assume he is referring to the minimum 5-mil property tax or “local fair share” that is required of each school system by the state and which cannot legally leave the district.

Representative Cantrell notes: “HB60 allows a student who is in a district which has not provided the option of in person instruction for at least a semester to qualify. It doesn’t take money away from the public school. The school on average receives an *additional* \$3800 per student since they no longer bare [sic] the expense of educating that student.”

First, no “additional” money for school districts and schools as a result of this bill as noted in the existing comments on local property taxes.

This statement from the sponsor hits on two points, what we will call the “or COVID qualifier” that allows any student, with or without medical condition or learning disability, to receive state-paid tuition to a private school and the “windfall” the sponsor says public schools will receive from de-populating public schools with the carrot of private education.

The “or COVID qualifier” is explained below.

The bill states that a student may qualify for private-school tuition from the state if the student is a resident of Georgia and has one of more than 7,000 specified medical conditions.

What appears next is incredible.

The list of medical conditions is followed by the word “or” and then the following language: “spent the previous school year enrolled in a public school which is part of a local school system not offering an option for students to receive 100 percent of instruction in person for at least one semester.” Please see the following screenshot from the actual bill:

- 96 (xi) Dyslexia;
- 97 (xii) Emotional or behavioral disorder;
- 98 (xiii) Epilepsy;
- 99 (xiv) Hearing impairment;
- 100 (xv) Intellectual disability;
- 101 (xvi) Muscular dystrophy;
- 102 (xvii) Specific learning disability;
- 103 (xviii) Spina bifida;
- 104 (xix) Traumatic brain injury;
- 105 (xx) Visual impairment; or
- 106 (xxi) Any rare disease identified by the National Institutes of Health's Genetic and
- 107 Rare Diseases Information Center's list of rare disease disorders; **or**
- 108 (E) Spent the previous school year enrolled in a public school which is part of a local
- 109 school system not offering an option for students to receive 100 percent of instruction
- 110 in person for at least one semester;

*What does this language mean? It means that students qualify if they have one of the described medical conditions **OR** were enrolled in a school system that did not offer at-school, in-person learning every day of one semester this school year. No qualifying disability or financial need is required.*

The result of this language is that any student in a public school qualifies for free, taxpayer-funded, private-school tuition because the child's school missed at least one day due to COVID (or weather conditions!)

If the private school founded by the sponsor of the bill were a public school, it would not qualify to accept these vouchers as it does not offer “100 percent of instruction in

person,” yet no language in this bill prohibits a private school, missing the same number of in-person days, from participating in the program.

Already addressed above is the so-called “windfall” that public schools received as well as the notion that public schools are “over-funded.”

Representative Cantrell also expounds: **“HB60 makes the list of private schools that families may choose to use public. Anyone can see the list of schools and how many students they have with an ESA.”**

This statement is not true under the version of the bill that was introduced in January by Representative Cantrell, which stated, “the report shall protect the identity of ... participating schools through whatever means the office deems appropriate ...”

The bill was changed this week. To call our claim that the bill sought to keep secret and hide the names of private schools enjoying state funding “inaccurate” is wrong. The amended bill was only shown publicly Tuesday, and the original version did seek to obscure the transparency of the flow of state payments to private schools.

The issue of accounting and transparency plagues the bill. Private schools funded by taxpayer dollars should be subject to the same transparency and accounting standards by which public schools and school districts are held accountable.

Representative Cantrell writes: **“The emails make a demonstrably false statement - “I am already disappointed by the lack of transparency and effectiveness the Georgia Department of Audits and Accounts found in voucher programs like HB60.” I’d like to see the proof of this. Georgia has never had a program like HB60.”**

HB 60 is a voucher bill that, like all voucher bills, takes money away from public education to pay for private school tuition. Two existing voucher programs are already established in Georgia: the “Georgia Special Needs Scholarship” (a bill to expand vastly that piece of legislation has passed the Senate Education Committee) and a tax-credit (Qualified Education Expense Tax Credit) of up to \$100 million a year for each dollar spent on private-school tuition. Legislation, HB 142, is working its way through the legislative process to increase the tax credit to \$150 million a year. Representative Cantrell is correct in the sense that his bill creates a new, third voucher program in Georgia, an “educational savings account” or ESA.

The ESA--a different mechanism with the same goal of transferring tax dollars to private schools--is populated by state tax dollars and used to fund a student’s private-school education.

Should HB 60 pass, wealthy, metro Atlanta parents could actually “triple-dip” claiming a “Special Needs Scholarship,” a tax write-off, and an ESA to lower their private-school

tuition, enough to reduce their tax burden and private school costs but not enough truly to help low-income families pay for private schooling.

The Georgia Department of Audits and Accounts released a report in January on the tax credit part of the voucher puzzle demanding improved data collection and oversight, both of which--improved data collection and oversight--could easily apply regarding HB 60 and the GSNS.

Representative Cantrell states the following: **“However, there will always be a small percentage of students who require a more customized approach that often cannot be provided by their public school.”**

The underlying and unspoken notion of some legislators seems to be private schools are better qualified to deal with students with special needs and services that “often cannot be provided by their public school.”

Nothing can be further from the truth. Public schools must, by law, provide a meaningful education for all students, with or without medical conditions or learning disabilities. Private schools are under no such legal requirement.

Public schools have years and years of experience in educating students with disabilities. Many private schools have none.

Students with disabilities in public schools have certain rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Private-school students do not.

In fact, vouchers are consistently associated with lower test scores for participating students. Recent studies from Indiana, Louisiana, Ohio, and Washington, D.C., show student performance suffers for students who change from public to private schools.

Representative Cantrell remarks: **“Remove some of the burdens on public schools ... We ask our public schools to do the impossible. They are required to provide a quality education for every student who shows up at their door, regardless of learning style, attention difficulties, disabilities or special needs. Its [sic] time we provide some options that will remove some of this burden from our public schools which will result in improved academic outcomes for those who need a more customized approach & for those who choose to remain in their public school.”**

Teachers and in-school educators do the impossible every day. Children are not a burden; they are our delight and passion.

Representative Cantrell acknowledges: **“Public school teachers are the best people on the planet. They are my heroes! I would never support any legislation which harmed our public schools!”**

We appreciate the kind words from Representative Cantrell, but we ask legislators to listen to those who know best about public schools: teachers, education support professionals, and school superintendents.

We would like Representative Cantrell to listen to leaders in his own county school system, for example, Mr. Mike McGowan with the Cherokee County School District, who came to the State Capitol to testify against the bill and the harm he believes HB 60 will have on students and on Cherokee County schools. We would like Representative Cantrell to listen to the educators who have written expressing serious concerns with the bill and its impact on local schools and students.

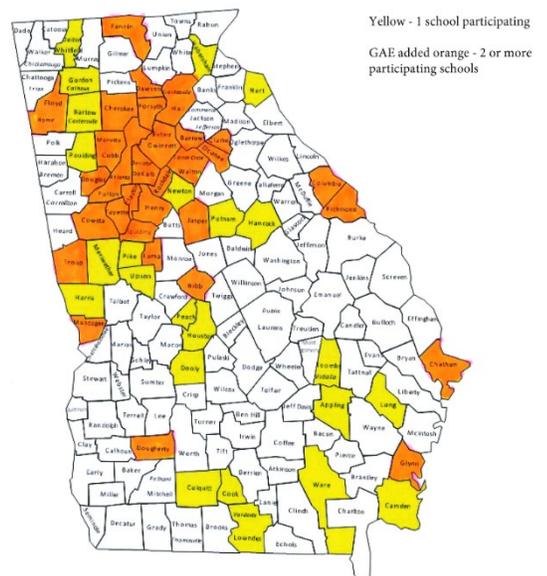
To the question of “How many students can participate?” Representative Cantrell writes: **“One half of one percent of total public school enrollment (around 8500 students). This number will escalate each year at .5% until it reaches a cap of 5% which will take 10 years.”**

Fact: In a few years, the program provides for up to 36,000 kids to have ESAs and private-school vouchers, costing the state a quarter-of-a-billion dollars.

Representative Cantrell purports the following: **“Educational Scholarship Accounts give parents the widest number of choices to address the specific needs of their children.”**

Of Georgia’s 159 counties, 128 have no or just one private school participating in the existing voucher program. For families and students in these most rural areas of Georgia, no choice exists, only the reality that local schools will be defunded with money leaving the community to the benefit of a private school in another county. Sixty percent of participating private schools are in metro Atlanta, a higher proportion than the state population for which it accounts. Only three counties below the Georgia Fall Line have private schools currently participating in the existing voucher program and many have no private school option.

Map: 2019-2020 School Year - School Systems where Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Private Schools Located



For further reading, please peruse the following:

[Opinion: Vouchers defund public education, no matter what lawmakers tell you](#)

<https://www.ajc.com/education/get-schooled-blog/opinion-vouchers-defund-public-education-no-matter-what-lawmakers-tell-you/TBTLUTAH2ZC4XE4MSRHIRK3NSY>

[Opinion: Why are GOP lawmakers vouching for vouchers?](#)

<https://www.ajc.com/education/get-schooled-blog/opinion-why-are-gop-lawmakers-vouching-for-vouchers/JSKBFUXL4JD6JC3LVUBCGBQFAY>