

## **WHY IS A SCHOOL VOUCHER PROGRAM WORTH HOLDING UP THE ENTIRE STATE BUDGET AND HURTING PENNSYLVANIA FAMILIES?**

While some have made the argument that the \$100 million proposed appropriation for a “P.A.S.S.” voucher program is a tiny sliver of the entire state budget, legislative Republicans were willing to give away the farm to get this “tiny” program up and running. As Senate Majority Leader Kim Ward stated, Senate leadership was willing to give Governor Shapiro “all the goodies” if he and House Democrats agreed to move forward with the new voucher program. But why? It’s important to examine the complicated and ominous history of private school voucher programs in the United States:

- Early voucher programs began in response to the landmark 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* declaring segregated schools to be unconstitutional. Following that decision, “segregation academies” were established across the southern United States, allowing white parents to avoid enrolling their children in schools alongside black children. States like Virginia **began offering** \$125 vouchers to white elementary students to attend nonsectarian private schools or public schools in other localities. Though federal law eventually made this kind of racial discrimination illegal, the **impacts remain to this day**.
- The next generation of school voucher systems typically started as narrow “pilot” programs, with income caps for participation and other limitations on what types of school vouchers could be used for. Once the programs were in place, it didn’t take long for states to begin eliminating those restrictions altogether, including five states that have implemented universal vouchers (**Arizona** in 2022, followed by **Iowa**, **Utah**, **Arkansas**, and **Florida** in 2023).
- Arizona is THE cautionary tale. The state proposed a modest school voucher program for students with special needs, but legislators, with the support of well-funded special interests, dramatically expanded and ballooned the proposal soon after its enactment. Under Arizona's universal voucher program, the overwhelming portion of tax dollars is not going to students who are looking to leave underperforming public schools, the supposed purpose of the program. More than 75% of applicants for school vouchers were students who have never attended a public school.
- As a result, the Arizona program has become a budget buster. Initial cost projections for the voucher program were severely underestimated - **by nearly 1,400%**. Now, the program is costing hundreds of millions more than the available funding, with \$540 dollars more per student being spent on voucher recipients than public school students.

This isn’t about a “small” \$100 million voucher program, though that’s the pitch for now. This is about a long-term restructuring of education in Pennsylvania driven by privatization zealots like Betsy DeVos and Jeffrey Yass that will redistribute taxpayer dollars to unaccountable private schools and will leave thousands of Pennsylvania students behind.

And beyond that, evidence shows these programs don’t improve outcomes for students. More on that in part three of this talking points memo tomorrow.