

For Immediate Release

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NC NAACP Statement on School Vouchers and the Constant Attempts by the Tea Party-Led General Assembly to Undermine Every Child's Constitutional Right to a Public Education

The North Carolina State Conference of the NAACP is proud that public education has been our national bread-and-butter issue for a century. We support high-quality, well-funded, diverse, constitutional public schools in North Carolina with stronger support for the teaching profession, excellent and ongoing training for teachers, smaller class size, and an emphasis on math, science, reading and history.

The NAACP has long been proud to be part of the Tar Heel state's legacy of support for public schools. At its best, this tradition has moved leaders of both parties, professional educators and business visionaries, to decide that our children deserved better than 48th or 49th. Together we have witnessed how strong public schools and vigorous economic development go hand in hand. We have risen together by keeping all of our children first among our concerns.

Sometimes we have had to struggle for simple fairness. North Carolina's NAACP filed more equalization and integration lawsuits in the four decades after World War II than any other state conference. Our goals were public-spirited and reasonable, and the courts virtually always agree, in the end. *Swann v. Mecklenburg*, which finally enforced the U.S. Supreme Court's unanimous 1954 *Brown* decision, which North Carolina continued to evade sixteen years later.

We never regarded equality and integration as separate issues; we knew decades ago that inequality enrolls wherever segregation holds classes. City leaders in Charlotte, for example, once boasted of "The City That Made It Work," referring to the integration plan created by black and white parents that made Charlotte prosperous and progressive. But Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools have sharply re-segregated since their 2002-03 adoption of "neighborhood schools," a phrase George Wallace brought to the battles over busing. Proponents claimed "neighborhood schools" would become stronger parts of their communities. But re-segregated schools got run-down buildings and less experienced teachers. In 2010, pleading lack of funds, CMS closed many schools, nearly all in black communities. "First they decided to re-segregate the schools, then they decided to close the schools in our neighborhoods," explains Rev. Kojo Nantambu, president of the Charlotte NAACP. "Either way," Nantambu observes, "when they make these decisions, the only people that suffer is always the poor--black, Latino, and poor whites. It's never a shared sacrifice." Segregation and inequality always ride the same bus.

Re-segregation and vouchers are also constant companions. All over North Carolina, far-right ideologues push vouchers that provide taxpayer dollars to private enterprises. Voucher subsidies for private schools will drain an estimated \$90 million from our public schools. Taxpayer money intended for our public schools will go to cul-de-sac academies that will not have to accept every student or meet state standards.

Our passion for excellent schools for *all* of North Carolina's children is why the NAACP opposes using public money for private schools. Why should we pay parents to abandon our public schools? Vouchers waste money by forcing taxpayers to fund two school systems. Let us be clear: there is certainly a role for private education, and that parental choice is perfectly legitimate. The taxpayers, however, should not be expected to fund every choice any of us might make. Public money is for public education.

There is no evidence that private schools perform better than public schools. An eight-year federal study of voucher systems in Milwaukee and the District of Columbia by President George W. Bush's Department of Education showed no improvements in academic performance. Advocates argued that competition would increase school performance, but school performance showed zero improvement. All vouchers do is funnel scarce funds from our public schools into private hands.

Proponents of HB 944, the voucher bill, call these private school subsidies "Opportunity Scholarships" and claim that their purpose is to help poor families. But the bill is designed to apply to more than half of the students in the first year and almost two-thirds after that. Soon thereafter the state will look toward extending the subsidies to families who had already placed their children in private academies. In short, the "Opportunity Scholarship" law ends up with North Carolina dispatching taxpayer dollars to affluent families to subsidize a privilege they can already afford, and public schools will suffer the loss of public funds.

Because the \$4,000 vouchers will not cover the full expense of private school tuition, they will mostly assist families who can already afford the high cost. In Charlotte, Greensboro, High Point, Durham, and Raleigh, home to more than half of the state's private academies, tuition ranges from \$5,500 to \$25,605, not counting huge initiation fees. These "Opportunity Scholarships" come with a big bill that most families could never pay. The fortunate ones who benefit will be those already blessed with opportunities.

The families left behind have just as much right to high-quality schools as those who abandon public education. Vouchers will carve out two separate and unequal school systems, one public, one private. Draining resources from our public schools will prevent North Carolina from meeting our state Constitution's requirement of equal opportunity for all children to get a sound basic education. It will undermine

opportunities for those it purports to help. The real rationale for voucher subsidies for private schools is political, and it is not a homegrown product of the Tar Heel state.

It is necessary to add here that wherever the far-right forces proposes private school subsidies in the form of vouchers, soon they will try to move toward "tuition tax credits." Many will recall the widely circulated video of House Speaker Pro Tem Paul Stam warning a closed session of Republicans to say "tax credits" and that he would "wash their mouths with soap" if he heard them say "vouchers. This was because "vouchers don't poll very well," he explained, so always remember to say "tax credits" instead. At the moment, Stam and his allies have the votes to pass anything at all, whether it polls well or not. Stam's preferred means of giving public funds to private interests, "tax credits," will not be far behind. Deceptive far-right forces always begin by painting tax credits, like vouchers, as assistance to the poor. In fact, tax credit subsidies to private schools are simply an even more poisonous cousin to vouchers, because only the wealthy can use them; tax credits require the beneficiary to pay the full cost up front but take a huge deduction on their taxes. Obviously, this is not an option for poor families or even many reasonably comfortable families who do not have a long list of tax exemptions, an accountant, and a bank balance big enough to cover the cost until tax time.

The American Legislative Exchange Council or "ALEC," a shadowy far-right organization funded by global corporations, drafted the voucher bill that our General Assembly is preparing to pass. ALEC has launched a sudden, well-orchestrated wave of virtually identical legislation in all 50 states. Its extremist ideology serves only the super-rich. North Carolina House Speaker Thom Tillis is a national board member. Gov. McCrory's legislative lobbyist, Fred Steen, served as state chair. McCrory has chosen not to reveal his ties to ALEC. More than twenty bills proposed by far-right extremists during the 2013 session, however, have language identical to bills pushed by ALEC in other states. One ALEC-authored bill sponsored by Rep. Jacqueline Schaffer (R-Charlotte Republican) protects Crown Holdings, a Philadelphia-based corporation, from any lawsuits by victims of asbestos injuries. Clearly, ALEC's foreign ideology and secret agenda have no roots in North Carolina. All this alien agenda does is push aside North Carolina's distinctive values and educational traditions in tribute to national far-right campaign contributors.

ALEC's vouchers will further re-segregate our schools by socioeconomic class. Mixed schools serve our children best, according to more than fifty years of scholarly research since the Coleman Report in 1966. Schools with a middle-class majority set a stronger tone of achievement. At a certain tipping point of impoverished children, who carry too many burdens as it is, schools become the last resort of those without alternatives, the kind of schools that sink into misery and failure. All of the failing schools in North Carolina reflect the ravages of re-segregation. In some cases, they have never complied with the *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Swann v. Mecklenburg* decisions, and children pay the price.

Re-segregation wrecks not only public schools but also whole economies. A 2007 Brookings Institution study shows clearly that re-segregation is the single most important factor in economic blight. It is not a coincidence that the 20 most economically depressed cities in the United States are also the most segregated by income and race.

North Carolina's future depends upon a mixed economy that includes high-tech jobs in fields like medicine, pharmaceuticals, engineering, and green energy. The mainstays of our old economy--textiles, tobacco, furniture, and light manufacturing--have collapsed. Our children's future depends on enterprises of all kinds coming here with high-end employment for our citizens. No cutting-edge company wants to relocate to cities where failing public schools push middle-class families into expensive private schools; for one thing, the companies would have to pay higher salaries to compensate for the expense. Re-segregation also undercuts property values, community engagement, and the quality of life in our communities.

Finally, the North Carolina NAACP challenges the bizarre economics behind this voucher bill. The central precept of capitalist economics is supply and demand. If we suddenly give more than half the families in a community \$4,000 checks that they can only spend on private schools, how much will local tuition rise? Recipients cannot use this money to buy a car or a washing machine; they have to buy private school tuition or nothing, which makes them a "captive market." Fundamental market economics tells us that tuition will soon go up about \$4,000. We may as well mail the checks directly to the owners of private academies. Are these really the people we want to lavish with taxpayer dollars while the General Assembly slashes jobless benefits and raises taxes on the poor and middle class?

Vouchers are a \$90 million giveaway of public money to private businesses. These academies do not even have to comply with the standards that we ask of our public schools. Despite their great expense, private schools do not have to provide a lunchroom, transportation, or certified teachers. They are not required to accept all students like public schools do. Instead, they can "cherry-pick" the best students and leave struggling students or those with special needs to our abandoned public schools. This bill slanders our public schools, pretending that private schools do a better job, but this is simply not the case. "Vouchers are an expensive, divisive program," writes former North Carolina superintendent of schools Dr. Mike Ward, "with no proven record of improving overall student performance."

The North Carolina NAACP supports research-based educational policy as a path toward excellent schools. We have neither permanent friends nor permanent enemies. We do have permanent principles. The well being of our state's students, teachers, and schools are at the top of the list. We do not endorse candidates; we do describe their positions on the issues. We do not care about the party affiliation of those who support public education in North Carolina-or those who damage it. Legislators who slash thousands of teachers and teaching assistants and push

half the at-risk children in the state out of proven Pre-K programs will not have the privilege of doing so in quiet darkness. Legislators who hack huge sums from our schools and give tax cuts to fat cats will answer to the voters.

Many of our legislators care deeply about the state's children. We hope they will ponder these issues carefully and pray for our state's young people before making hasty decisions. All the children are our children, all the children are God's children. The destruction of our public schools will forfeit a decent future of all of North Carolina's families.

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