



THE SOUTH CAROLINA
SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

OPINION

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Pandemic money pouring into private schools at the public's expense

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In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, as educators have worked tirelessly to find the ways and means to reopen schools safely for the 740,000 students who attend our state's public schools, private school voucher proponents have been pushing a different agenda—pouring public money into private schools. And they are succeeding.

South Carolinians were justifiably outraged by Gov. Henry McMaster's recent decision, announced at a private school in Greenville, to allocate two-thirds of a \$48 million federal relief fund to private schools.

In fact, this expensive gift is just the latest in a huge outpouring of subsidies for private schools, which have profited already from federal relief funds and are set to profit further, at great expense to students in public schools.

Wealthy private schools across the nation have been criticized for accepting millions in largely forgivable Paycheck Protection Loans established by the federal CARES Act to help small businesses stay afloat during the pandemic.

In South Carolina, many of our richest private schools received forgivable loans totaling millions, thousands of times higher than the \$100,000 average for small businesses as reported by the U.S. Small Business Administration. As reported by The Post and Courier, Charleston's Porter-Gaud, with an \$18 million endowment, received \$3.6 million in public funding, while Ashley Hall, another of the state's wealthiest and most elite schools, received \$2.2 million. Christ Church Episcopal School in Greenville received between \$2 million and \$5 million, despite, according to the Greenville News, an endowment of nearly \$16 million.

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Loan awards are reported within a wide range, but in all, 90 private schools in South Carolina received loans totaling between \$29 million on the low end of that range and \$70 million on the high end, a conservative average of \$322,000 per school.

The diversion of emergency aid to private schools is set to expand when school reopens. This time, though, the money will come directly from the public school students who need it most.

Of the CARES Act funding allocated to South Carolina public schools, \$194.6 million is being distributed to school districts based largely on the number of their students who live in poverty. Under a rule issued by U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, whose unabashed agenda is to promote private education, this funding must be shared with private schools, and their amount is to be based on total student enrollment—regardless of need.

In other words, funding intended for students who have faced the greatest educational disruption and have the greatest educational needs will instead directly underwrite private school enrollment, even for well-off families.

Meanwhile, due to lower revenue forecasts, public schools likely will not see any increase in state funding but will face higher costs for employee salaries, implementing measures to keep staff and students safe and creating multiple learning options for students and families.

McMaster's decision to use \$32 million in discretionary CARES Act funding for the benefit of private schools—the exact amount, tellingly, that private schools predict they will lose in tuition as a result of the pandemic—generates an unfortunate statistic: taxpayers will now fund emergency relief for private schools in South Carolina at twice the per-student rate for public schools.

This is no accident. It is an orchestrated and ideologically driven effort to provide government support for private schools at the expense of public schools.

Arguments against public funding for private schools are as sound as they have always been. Public schools still take all who come, while private schools often choose the most easily educable. Public schools provide universal, free education, while private schools charge tuition. Public schools report student progress and account to taxpayers for use of funds, and private schools do not.

But the challenges public schools face—so significant even in the best of times—have never been greater than today, as they prepare to safely resume the education of more than 90 percent of the state's student population.

That population is South Carolina's future. Every public dollar allocated for education—federal or state—should be used to support the teachers and schools that are working not just for a few, but for all.

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The South Carolina School Boards Association (SCSBA), a non-profit organization, serves as a source of information and as a statewide voice for boards governing the state's 79 public school districts. Find detailed S.C. school board information at scsba.org.