

Pell Grants for Kids

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Darlene Allen

DC PTA

President

Testimony

Good morning. As president of the District of Columbia PTA, I am here representing National PTA's 6 million members, as well as the parents, teachers, school administrators, and other child advocates that make up the District of Columbia PTA.

Before I begin my testimony, I want to thank Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Dodd, and the other members of the Subcommittee for inviting me here today to address Senator Alexander's proposal.

The PTA has always supported increased funding for education— especially funding targeted to assist low- and middle-income students. We have also long supported Pell Grants for college students. These grants allow many students who could not otherwise afford it, to pursue higher education. However, I believe that Senator Alexander's proposal, despite its name, does not operate like a true Pell Grant and will hurt, rather than assist, the intended beneficiaries.

The original Pell Grant program is the largest needs-based federal postsecondary student financial aid program administered by the U.S. Department of Education. It was designed to increase enrollment of low-income students by providing them with the financial means to achieve their dreams of postsecondary education. If the program did not exist, tens of thousands of students throughout the country would not be able to afford college.

Senator Alexander's initiative, however, is not needed to increase public elementary and secondary school enrollment. Unlike higher education, elementary and secondary education in this country is both compulsory and free. No incentives are needed to encourage enrollment. As such, Senator Alexander's initiative is simply a voucher program—a program I have come to know well as President of the District of Columbia PTA, and a program that D.C. and National PTA strongly oppose because of the negative impact it has on public education.

When it was first debated, the D.C. and National PTA opposed the D.C. federal voucher program for the following reasons: public funds should be used for public education; there is no evidence that vouchers increase student achievement; vouchers undermine public accountability; vouchers do not expand parents' educational choices because the choice lies in the hands of the private schools' admission policies; and vouchers discriminate against children with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency. We opposed vouchers then and we oppose vouchers now, no matter what form they may come or by what name they are called.

Senator Alexander's voucher program raises many of the same concerns that the D.C. federal voucher program raised. In just its first year, the program would divert up to \$2.5 billion of scarce public funds away from public schools and Title I programs. In the following years, the cost of this program rises to a staggering \$15 billion a year.

The \$500 vouchers that would be provided under the program are not required to be spent on public school programs. Instead, families would be allowed to use the money for any type of public or private academic expense, including childcare, music lessons, or art supplies. While all of these areas are important, the proposal fails to address the true financial crisis facing public schools.

This year alone, programs authorized under the No Child Left Behind Act are underfunded by more than \$9 billion. Programs authorized under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act are underfunded by more than \$11 billion. If new money is available, we strongly recommend that it be allocated to funding No Child Left Behind programs and requirements and IDEA programs and requirements, rather than to an experimental voucher program such as this one.

Senator Alexander's initiative will not only divert new money from public education, full implementation of this program will clearly lead to cuts in existing programs. While proponents of the program have claimed that the annual expense of \$15 billion could be achieved without cutting existing programs, that is difficult to believe given the swelling deficits faced by the federal, state, and local governments, increased costs associated with implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, inflation, and population increases.

Senators—when you passed the No Child Left Behind Act, it was stated that one of your primary reasons for doing so was to make schools accountable. Yet, in addition to the huge cost, and unlike education programs funded by real Pell Grants, Senator Alexander's voucher program would directly undermine that accountability. Polling data indicate that a majority of Americans believe that private schools that accept government funds should be accountable in the same way as public schools. Public schools and higher education institutions funded by real Pell Grants are held to rigorous eligibility requirements. Yet, as with other voucher programs, the private programs receiving funds under this initiative would likely not be held to the same strict NCLB requirements and accountability measures that apply to public schools.

In addition, while the \$500 scholarships that would be provided under Senator Alexander's proposal are clearly federal aid, applicable federal civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination based on race, disability, and gender will be virtually unenforceable. Under this proposal, there are no clear mechanisms for the federal government to monitor the civil rights compliance of entities receiving funds under this program, and it will be impossible for the federal government to determine whether private schools and institutions receiving these federal funds are avoiding compliance with federal civil rights laws and engaging in discriminatory policies or practices.

I also believe that this program will hinder, rather than help, even those public schools receiving funds. Under the program, parents would designate by June 1 of each year a public or private school or other academic program to be the recipient of the funds, which would be transferred by the U.S. Department of Education by August 1 for use during the school year. Accordingly, local school districts would not learn of the available amount until funds were in hand, rendering appropriate budgeting, hiring, facilities management, and other planning processes impossible.

Lastly, this program is being touted as offering parents more power to improve schools. Yet, without any requirements that the money be spent on public school programs, this power is meaningless. If you truly want to give parents more power, then provide our nation's public schools with adequate funding designed to help all children.

Fully fund the No Child Left Behind Act so that class sizes can be reduced, teacher quality improved, and deteriorating schools mended and modernized. If children are entering kindergarten unprepared, support early childhood education programs that are aligned with school-readiness standards. If students need extra assistance to meet high academic standards, provide expanded learning opportunities and on-site before- and after-school. If parents need help improving their children's schools, support programs that promote and facilitate parent involvement.

The Senate has repeatedly rejected vouchers in the past, and should do so again. Please do not be fooled by the lingo. This proposal is an expensive diversion from the real challenges facing our schools today. Voucher programs such as this one, even when called by a different name, will do nothing to help our nation's public schools. The only way to ensure that every child has an equal and valuable education is to invest and improve our public school system.

Thank you for your commitment to our children, and for giving me this opportunity to share my concerns. I would be happy to respond to any questions.