

**Appropriations Committee
Education Committee
Pennsylvania House of Representatives**

October 25, 2023

Chairmen Harris, Schweyer, Grove, and Topper—and Honorable Members of the Appropriations and Education Committees

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony against the Pennsylvania Award for Student Success (PASS) bill.

My name is Josh Cowen, I'm a Professor of Education Policy at Michigan State University, and I've been studying school voucher programs for almost 20 years.

I'll get right to the point: voucher plans like PASS are **the educational equivalent of predatory lending**.

And yes, respectfully, **PASS is a school vouchers plan**. I've heard a lot of explanations for why this bill and others just like it in states across the country should be called something else, but here's the bottom line: does it use tax dollars to cover private tuition? If so, it's a voucher.¹

The first thing to know is that for the children who transfer from public to private school using a PASS-style voucher, **the academic results are devastating**—roughly on par with what COVID19 or Hurricane Katrina did to test scores.

Now, you may hear some voucher advocacy groups counting studies suggesting otherwise but here's the truth: Over the last ten years, as vouchers have scaled up statewide, the results are dreadful. **The larger and the more recent the voucher program the worse the results.**²

Why is that? Most voucher-receiving schools tend to be what I call **sub-prime**: either financially distressed schools barely hanging on before the voucher bailout, or **pop-up schools** opening just to cash in on the new subsidy. Many of those schools end up closing soon after.³

Effective private schools certainly do exist, but remember this: **private providers can reject children for any reason**. Or expel them once they're enrolled.

We've seen reports of this all over the country: lower income students, students of color, students with disabilities and even students who may have LGBTQ+ parents have all been turned down or asked to leave.⁴

When it comes to vouchers like PASS, it's really **the school's choice, not school choice**.

You may also hear from voucher backers that these plans create “competitive pressures” on public school outcomes. There's a very important caveat: so-called competitive effects only exist where districts with large numbers of at-risk kids are **threatened with funding loss**. Which means that claims that vouchers create competition are at odds with claims that vouchers don't defund public schools.

The current language in the PASS bill actively encourages students to leave public schools by requiring what amounts to **advertising by the state against local public school districts**.

Finally, if this legislature were indeed to approve PASS or a similar voucher plan, **it's critical that the bill contain far greater oversight provisions** than what is currently written, which is more of a blank check than most I've seen nationally.

Research tells us that when voucher schools have to follow the same testing and reporting requirements as other publicly funded schools, outcomes for voucher kids do improve, so long-term success for the program would partly depend on annual check-up.⁵

Taken on the whole, the research case against voucher plans like PASS is about as one-sided as social science gets.

Objective, independent data tell us that—far from an educational lifeline—PASS will be more of an anchor for some of the most vulnerable Pennsylvania children.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide that warning today.

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¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/research-on-school-vouchers-suggests-concerns-ahead-for-education-savings-accounts/>

² <https://ceep.indiana.edu/education-policy/policy-briefs/2022/evolving-evidence-on-school-voucher-effects.pdf>

³ https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/psj.12164?casa_token=wkCqeQEzSwsAAAAA%3AFMpeQyrKwiL_PdGv9ug43eCFJoLFGUmHeQPvsDM4NEES8VITgJVZ7YISN-4gS1f5AZ2zpjSqC29e2jzg

⁴ <https://wisconsinwatch.org/2023/05/wisconsin-voucher-schools-discrimination-lgbtq-disabilities/>

⁵ Witte, J. F., Wolf, P. J., Cowen, J. M., Carlson, D. E., & Fleming, D. J. (2014). High-stakes choice: Achievement and accountability in the nation's oldest urban voucher program. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 36(4), 437-456