

Good afternoon, and thank you for allowing me to speak before you today.

My name is Peter Greene. I retired after 39 years as an English teacher, with 38 of those years spent in Franklin Area Schools up in Venango County. It's the same district that I graduated from. My two older children went through that system, I have a pair of twins passing through now, and my wife teaches in a neighboring district, so I have many stakes in Pennsylvania education. For the past decade I've been writing about education; my works has been in the Huffington Post, the Washington Post, and Education Week. These days I write regularly about education for Forbes.com and The Progressive, as well as my own blog.

I've spent a lot of time tracking and studying education policy trends across the country, comparing states based on their support of or hostility to public education. Pennsylvania does a pretty good job, and Pennsylvania teachers do a good job as well.

How do we do better? Today I'd like to focus on meaningful accountability.

There are few policy decisions that have had a more toxic effect on education than the advent of high stakes testing. Reducing the impact of Keystone and PSSA testing on teacher evaluations was a step forward. It would be even better to reduce the weight of those tests to zero, including taking them out of the assessment of school effectiveness.

The PSSA and Keystone exams do not provide useful data to classroom teachers. The information that they supply comes too late and too vague to be helpful, especially because teachers are forbidden to see the actual questions that students had trouble with. Nor do the results provide information teachers didn't already have. No teachers are looking at Keystone results and saying, "I had no idea that this student was having trouble with the material."

Twenty-some years of high stakes testing has twisted education out of shape. Administrators and teachers should be making curriculum and instructional choices based on the question "will it help us provide students with a full, effective, well-rounded education," Instead, too many schools have been asking "Will it raise test scores?"

In my own subject area, testing has been particularly corrosive. Teachers spend much of the year on test prep, which means practicing taking that particular kind of test. The test does not involve reading whole works and then reflecting and digging deeply into the ideas, but reading a short excerpt without context and answering a handful of multiple choice questions quickly—right now—That's the test, so that's what students practice. Short excerpts of context-free readings have replaced study of full works, and that's a big loss to education.

We can hold local administrators partly responsible for these kinds of choices or for the over-scheduling of practice tests, but state policy has pushed them by putting too much value on these tests.

Do we need accountability for schools? Absolutely. But these high stakes tests don't provide it.

An effective assessment is a tool built for a particular purpose, and that's the purpose it serves. A really good Philips head screwdriver works great for putting in Phillips head screws. It does not work for slotted screws, and it doesn't work as a tape measure or a router or a sabre saw. To create a solid accountability system, it's necessary to answer the questions accountable to whom, and accountable for

what? The Keystone and PSSA systems have tried to be accountable to everyone for everything, and to do it in a manner that is reductive and unproductive.

The best metaphor I've read for the high stakes system is someone is searching for the car keys at night in a darkened parking lot. They're looking around under the streetlight, even though they dropped their cars fifty feet away in the dark. Asked for an explanation, they say, "Yes, I know the keys are probably over there, but the light is so much better over here."

Truly measuring educational effectiveness is hard. The tests do a great job of coming up with numbers that look like hard data. Does that data reflect the full rich reality of a school? Do they measure the effectiveness of the school or the achievement of students or teachers? No. Confronted with the idea of cutting the high stakes from these tests, supporters will argue, "Well, without the tests, how will we have accountability? How will we get a picture of how well schools are doing." My reply is, "You aren't getting that picture now, and you're doing damage to school in the process."

Teachers just don't want to be held accountable is another argument we hear, which is simply not true. Teachers like accountability, but real accountability, and right now the state is still looking for its keys under the streetlight.

High stakes testing has also produced a basic dishonesty in discussion about accountability. Too many people keep using the phrase "student achievement" when what they actually mean is "student score on a single standardized math and reading test."

There has been so much discussion about making up for educational opportunities lost during the pandemic. Removing high stakes testing, or at least the high stakes, would instantly give schools and teachers additional weeks of time in the school year, and it wouldn't cost a cent.

High stakes testing has also been damaging by feeding the notion that schools are failing, buttressing the case for alternatives to public schools. I urge you to resist those arguments. In particular, I'm asking you to resist the continued push for more school vouchers in Pennsylvania.

The most recent version of the Lifeline Scholarships vetoed by the governor, and the Pennsylvania Award for Student Success program passed by the Senate are certainly more restrained voucher programs than we've seen in previous years or in some other states.

We don't have a lot of voucher experience in Pennsylvania beyond the [Educational Improvement Tax Credits](#) (EITC) and [Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credits](#) (OSTC), and we don't know much about how those are working because so little accountability is attached to them.

But we do know a lot about how vouchers work in other states, and we need to pay attention to those examples.

For one thing, we know that voucher programs tend to expand, even when they start as small as the most recent voucher proposals in Harrisburg.

Programs typically start on a small scale with the argument that they are just to rescue a few students living in poverty and attending so called failing schools. States start with a traditional voucher that pays tuition at a private school and then expand to ESA vouchers that give families money to spend on any number of education-adjacent expenses. States start with caps on eligibility, including caps on family

income and requirements that the students be moving out of public school then the program expands toward universal vouchers. In the past two years six states have expanded their programs to universal ESA vouchers, meaning tax dollars can flow to any student. That means that a wealthy family that never enrolled their students in public schools can still collect taxpayer money. This kind of inevitable expansion turns vouchers from a rescue for the poor into an entitlement for the rich.

Consequently, voucher programs also expand in cost. In New Hampshire, a voucher program was sold to the legislature with a projected cost to the state of \$130,000 per year. Two years later it was almost \$15 million and rising. That rising cost can hit families as well. In Iowa, when the voucher system was expanded, many private schools immediately raised tuition costs.

We know that without any state oversight in place, vouchers often give rise to pop up schools. Rent a store front in a strip mall, advertise your school or service, market hard to collect a batch of enrollments with their voucher dollars, provide substandard service, and go out of business—the average life span of these schools is about four years. Proponents will argue that this is just the market working, that families are providing accountability by voting with their feet. But that comes at the cost of a year or more of a child's education. If we are concerned about the time lost due to pandemic closures, surely we must be equally concerned about keeping fraudulent and incompetent actors from wasting irreplaceable years of a young person's education.

Fortunately, the pop up voucher schools do not dominate the voucher market place. We know that the vast majority of vouchers are used in private religious schools, including schools whose stated mission is not to educate students, but to bring them to Christ.

We know that many of those schools teach questionable content. The war between the states wasn't really about slavery. All Muslims hate America. Satan created modern psychology. Humans and dinosaurs lived together.

We know that those private schools often discriminate. Among the private schools accepting vouchers across the nation, we find those who will not accept students with special needs, or LGBTQ students, or students with an LGBTQ family member, or students who are not Christian. We find schools that will only accept students who don't listen to secular music, who are born again Christians, or who have born again Christian parents. One school in North Carolina does not require teachers to have a license, but they do have to demonstrate their relationship with Jesus by speaking in tongues.

Not only do states not step in to stop such taxpayer funded miseducation or discrimination, but most voucher bills are now written with specific clauses saying that those who accept voucher dollars are not state actors and that the state may not in any way interfere with how the school operates or teaches. Both the most recent version of the Lifeline and PASS vouchers include that language.

Voucher programs promise school choice, but in fact, the choice is the school's, not the family's. Families that cannot meet the school's requirement, or whose voucher still won't cover the tuition cost, get no choice, and their public school will have even fewer resources to meet their needs. Draining public school funding for a voucher program is not the way to fix Pennsylvania's unconstitutional school funding system.

Nor is there accountability elsewhere in a voucher landscape.

A voucher system disenfranchises taxpayers who don't have children. If you have no school age children, you have no say in how the taxpayer dollars in that voucher are spent. There is nobody for you to hold accountable. And because vouchers move the purse strings from your local elected school board to officials in the state capital, local control is lessened. In Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis found that four private schools have programs he disapproves of, so he cut off their access to vouchers. Those parents have no recourse.

Vouchers avoid accountability to the voters. No voucher program has ever passed a public vote in a state. Voters reject the idea of using tax dollars to fund private religious school tuition. These days supporters call vouchers scholarships because the term voucher tests poorly with audiences. So voucher fans try other ways, despite resistance. In Texas, where rural legislators of both parties recognize vouchers as a threat to their public schools, Governor Abbott is holding a special session to try, again, to force passage of vouchers. In New Hampshire, a voucher bill was proposed, over 3000 people showed up at the capital to argue against it. So the legislature withdrew the bill, and snuck vouchers into the budget instead. That's the very opposite of accountability to the voters.

Vouchers dodge accountability to parents. The voucher deal is simple—the state tells parents here's a few thousand dollars. Now making sure your child gets a decent education is your responsibility, not the state's or the community's.

It is true that Pennsylvania has not always perfectly met its promise to provide a quality education for every child, hence the recent court order for better funding. But the solution is not to buy out families' claim to that promise with a small slice of taxpayer money and say, "Go navigate an unregulated marketplace on your own. If you're unable to get into the school you want, or your child ends up in a substandard private school, that's your problem."

Of course, education is not their problem alone. All of us depend on and benefit from a strong and accountable public education system, and that's where I hope legislators will direct their efforts. Thank you.