



Protecting the Equal Rights
of Nonreligious Americans

February 12, 2025

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The Honorable Bill Cassidy
Chair
HELP Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bernie Sanders
Ranking Member
HELP Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Cassidy and Sanders,

The Secular Coalition for America, on behalf of its twenty member organizations dedicated to the separation of church and state, freedom of religion or belief, and the rights of the nonreligious, is writing to urge you to oppose the nomination of Linda McMahon to be Secretary of Education. Minimally, any executive nominee should be committed to upholding the mission of the department they will oversee, whereas McMahon's support for school privatization measures indicates she has no intention of "ensuring equal access" or "fostering educational excellence."

McMahon's support for school vouchers, which decades of independent research have shown drain money from the public education system that teaches nearly 90 percent of America's students, is incompatible with the mission of the Department of Education. Vouchers divert billions of public dollars each year to private, mostly religious schools that serve just 10 percent of students nationally. We are strenuously opposed to any diversion of public tax dollars to subsidize religious schools and sectarian instruction.

The Constitution is a uniquely secular document that established a secular government. It separates church and state. School vouchers and other privatization schemes are a clear effort to integrate the two in violation of long-established legal precedent and in spite of their unpopularity with American voters, who have repeatedly and soundly rejected these measures.



Atheists. Agnostics. Humanists. Americans.

There are many other evidence-based reasons to oppose school voucher programs and, correspondingly, any Secretary of Education nominee who would disregard these facts and promote a harmful agenda:

- Vouchers do not improve the achievement of students who use them to attend private school. Rather, long-term studies are increasingly showing voucher recipients have experienced significant declines in academic performance.¹
- Vouchers do not save taxpayers money or force public schools to improve. Instead, they routinely compel jurisdictions to raise taxes to support two competing education systems. By diverting millions or billions of scarce public dollars to a parallel, private education system, we undermine fact-based efforts to improve public schools and apply additional fiscal pressure to an already chronically underfunded public system.
- Public schools have fixed costs which are not reduced when voucher recipients choose to leave a public classroom.
- Research shows that in state after state, most vouchers go to wealthy families whose students never attended a public school, thus subsidizing private school tuition for those who can already afford it rather than ensuring equal access for those who cannot.²
- Unlike public schools, private and religious schools can — and do — discriminate on the basis of religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability, English language learner status, refugee status, behavioral history, prior academic achievement, standardized test scores, interviews with applicants and parents, income, and other characteristics. Public dollars should not be used to fund educational models that are not required to serve all children, and they certainly must not be used to subsidize discriminatory practices by private entities, including sectarian schools.

¹ Lubienski, C. & Canbolat, Y. (2022, March). *Evolving Evidence on School Voucher Effects*. Indiana University Bloomington School of Education.

<https://education.indiana.edu/research/centers/ceep/education-policy/policy-briefs/2022/evolving-evidence-on-school-voucher-effects.html>; Canbolat, Y. (2022, October). *Does Competition Help Schools*. Indiana University Bloomington School of Education.

<https://education.indiana.edu/research/centers/ceep/education-policy/policy-briefs/2022/does-competition-help-schools.html>;

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² Davis, Carl. (2023, March). *Tax Avoidance Continues to Fuel School Privatization Efforts*. Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy.

<https://sfo2.digitaloceanspaces.com/itep/ITEP-brief-2023-Tax-Avoidance-Continues-to-Fuel-School-Privatization-Efforts.pdf>




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- The U.S. Government Accountability Office has determined there is little to no oversight of private schools that receive public dollars. In many states that have enacted voucher programs, a lack of public oversight, accountability, transparency, and reporting requirements has led to egregious cases of misuse, abuse, and fraud.

Despite these and other proven shortcomings of school privatization policies, Linda McMahon continues to promote these programs. As Chairman of the Board of the America First Policy Institute she is accountable for AFPI's many policy statements supporting school vouchers, such as "AFPI Champions President Trump's Executive Order Expanding School Choice."

The Secretary of Education ought to be a champion for *all* of America's students, an experienced leader who is responsive to the American people and an expert who respects decades of independent research – not a loyalist, ideologue, or extremist who will promote schemes to defund nonsectarian public schools and divert those resources to unaccountable, discriminatory religious entities. We respectfully urge you to oppose this nomination.

Sincerely,


Steven Emmert
Executive Director

American Atheists

American Ethical Union

American Humanist Association

Association of Secular Elected Officials

Atheist Alliance of America

Black Nonbelievers

Center For Inquiry/Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science

Camp Quest

Ex-Muslims of North America

Freedom From Religion Foundation Action Fund

Freethought Society

Hispanic American Freethinkers

Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers



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Recovering From Religion

Secular Student Alliance

Secular Woman

Society for Humanistic Judaism

The Clergy Project

Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association