

# School vouchers are bad public policy

BY J.D. MERRILL

**O**n the same day that U.S. News & World Report announced that Maryland public high schools led the nation for the second year in a row, Liz Bowie reported in *The Baltimore Sun* that state lawmakers approved a program to offer scholarships for low-income public school students to help them attend private schools through a state-funded voucher program.

At best, private school vouchers are horrible public policy that gives false hope to those who most need better schools.

The premise of a voucher program is that low-income students would benefit from a private education. While this may be true in some cases, the unfortunate reality is that, just like there exist high-performing and low-performing public schools, there also exist high-performing and low-performing private schools. My suspicion is that this voucher program would disproportionately place low-income students into low-performing private schools that have neither the experience nor resources to support the unique needs of learners living in poverty.

If you are imagining the voucher program giving greater access for low-income students to attend elite schools like Bryn Mawr and Gilman, then think again. Elite schools already have need-based and merit-based aid to help a limited number of qualified low-income students gain access. The addition of a voucher program

won't help more kids gain access to these schools. For one, voucher programs only cover partial tuition. If a kid can't afford lunch in a public school, they won't be able to afford partial tuition at a private school.

In fact, the Maryland voucher program only allows the voucher to be used at private schools where tuition is less than \$14,000 per year. This stipulation greatly reduces the universe of private schools that low-income students are eligible to gain access to, a universe that includes schools that do not comply with best practices in education and do not prepare students for the rigors of secondary or post-secondary education. In some cases, these schools are worse than low-performing public schools. The general public is typically not aware of how bad these schools are because private schools do not face the same accountability and transparency measures as public ones.

While it is certainly true that there exist excellent private schools where tuition is less than \$14,000, the ones that I have seen, as a ninth-grade teacher, that do the best job preparing students for high school are schools like Sisters Academy of Baltimore and St. Ignatius Loyola Academy in Baltimore City, both of which are already tuition-free and already make serving low-income students a central part of their mission and program.

Moreover, the Maryland program is only funded for one year, meaning that students are only guaranteed funding to help afford the private school for one year.

Since the schools they are most likely to attend do not have the endowments of the elite schools, we cannot expect the schools to pick up the bill in subsequent years to allow the kids to stay. When you consider this alongside the fact that nearly one-quarter of all students that take advantage of voucher programs in other states have ended up back in the public school system, you can clearly see that vouchers are not a long-term solution our state should be pursuing.

State-funded vouchers for private schools are bad public policy for taxpayers and students alike. When public funds are used for private education, public schools and the students that attend them are hurt. Additionally, many students who do take advantage of the program do not benefit from it in the long run. Therefore, state-funded private school vouchers are a lose-lose proposition.

Instead of hedging our bets on losing ideas, we need to dial up our investment on things that work. We need to invest in community schools, wrap-around services, transportation, and teacher and administrator recruitment, support and development.

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