



February 28, 2019

Representative Wes Cantrell  
Chair, Small Business Development  
401-H Coverdell Legislative Office Building  
18 Capitol Square SW  
Atlanta, GA 30334

Representative Jodi Lott  
Governor's Floor Leader  
109 State Capitol  
Atlanta, GA 30334

Dear Chairman Cantrell and Floor Leader Lott:

On behalf of the Southern Education Foundation (SEF) and the hundreds of education advocacy organizations and school district leaders we affiliate with in 17 southern states<sup>1</sup>, I write to express SEF's serious concerns with House Bill 301 – the Georgia Educational Scholarship Act. SEF's views on Education Savings Accounts and other private school choice options are informed by 150 years of research, leadership development, and advocacy advancing policies for low-income students and students of color in the South. SEF's expertise researching education inequities is linked to the role state's play in setting current day policies for the most vulnerable student population.

As you know, state governments maintain a fundamental responsibility to ensure all children have access to a free public education. Under Article VIII, Section I of the Georgia Constitution, it says, "The provision of an adequate public education for the citizens shall be a primary obligation of the State of Georgia." The creation of an Education Savings Account that allows public funds to support private schools breaks the spirit if not the letter of the Georgia constitution by taking desperately needed operational funds away from public schools.

SEF also knows the establishment of private schools in the southern United States is deeply rooted in efforts to maintain racial segregation, which is demonstrated by the immediate increase (43 percent) of private schools and enrollment in private schools by white students across the southern states after *Brown v. Board of Education*, as compared to such growth and enrollment across the country.<sup>2</sup> Supporting access to private schools with public funds not only dismantles the public education system but also perpetuates racial segregation and isolation.

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<sup>1</sup> Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia

<sup>2</sup> A New Era of State-Funded Segregation in Private Schools" Southern Education Foundation <https://www.southerneducation.org/Our-Strategies/Research-and-Publications/Race-Ethnicity-Landing-Pages/A-New-Era-of-State-Funded-Segregation-in-Private-S.aspx> (accessed January 13, 2019); "A History of Private Schools and Race in the American South" Southern Education Foundation <https://www.southerneducation.org/Our-Strategies/Research-and-Publications/Race-Ethnicity-Landing-Pages/A-History-of-Private-Schools-Race-in-the-American.aspx> (accessed January 13, 2019).

Additionally, a review of one of the most comprehensive private school choice programs from the Center on Education Policy concluded that studies found no academic achievement benefits for students attending private schools with public monies.<sup>3</sup> Yet, HB 301 promotes private schools despite the lack of evidence students will academically benefit. Policymakers may be compelled to provide additional “school choice options” for parents who live in communities zoned for chronically underperforming schools. Under federal law, there are existing choice options within the public school system, including charter and magnet schools. According to the Georgia Department of Education, the total number of charter schools has grown from 37 to 512 in the past 11 years. The charter school student enrollment has grown 20-times from 17,250 in 2008 to 352,350 in 2018. Most parents in Georgia have a plethora of public school options.

Finally, supporting private schools with public dollars is duplicative and unnecessary. It is an inefficient use of taxpayer money because it compels taxpayers to support two school systems: one public and one private, the latter of which is not accountable to all the taxpayers supporting it. We would encourage you not to advance HB 301 bill through the general assembly. My staff and I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you on this bill. Perhaps through an informed dialogue, we hope changes could be made to HB 301 that would satisfy both SEF’s concerns with sound public education policy and your efforts to advance educational opportunities to families in Georgia. Please contact me at 404-523-0001 or [rpierce@southerneducation.org](mailto:rpierce@southerneducation.org) or my Director of Government Affairs, Fred Jones, at 404-991-6777 or [fjones@southerneducation.org](mailto:fjones@southerneducation.org) should you desire to speak in greater detail about the bill or the contents of this letter. We look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely,



Raymond Pierce

President and CEO of the Southern Education Foundation

Cc: Governor Brian Kemp; Rep. Barry Fleming; Rep. Ron Stephens; Rep. Micah Gravley, and Rep. Brett Harrell

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<sup>3</sup> Usher, A. & Kober, N. (2011) *Keeping Informed about School Vouchers: A Review of Major Developments and Research*. Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy.