

e·gre·gious

adjective

flagrantly and outstandingly bad,
offensive, or shocking

*The school voucher bill is an egregious violation of
NC's commitment to public education.*

SYN: grievous, heinous, appalling, intolerable

Former UNC System VP: School voucher bill egregiously undermines public ed and democracy

By Charles R. Coble

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Coble is a retired UNC System vice president, former Dean of East Carolina University's School of Education, and recent co-founder of the Friends of Public Education Steering Committee, seven of whom signed on to this op-ed: Larry Coble, Janice Davis, Nancy Farmer, Bill Harrison, Dick Jones, Larry Mabe and Michael D. Priddy.

The North Carolina General Assembly is proposing to divert millions of taxpayer dollars, in an arguably unconstitutional manner, away from the public schools and into the hands of private and parochial schools with none of the transparency and accountability required of the public schools.

We are a group of mostly retired educators from across North Carolina who have come together in recent weeks out of alarm over what the legislature is proposing to do.

[Senate Bill 406](#) and [House Bill 823](#) will [use tax dollars to support Opportunity Scholarships](#) for the private education of children, not just from low-wealth families, but for the first time, to wealthy families and those already enrolled in private schools. Senate Bill 406 would provide over \$2.2 billion of taxpayer money for private school vouchers over the next 10 years.

Egregiously, the N.C. General Assembly is allowing these private and religious schools to discriminate against the children of the state based on religious beliefs and the personal characteristics of voucher applicants. Private and parochial schools can pick and choose students who align with their beliefs and reject others. The public schools are open to all regardless of race, creed, color, sexual orientation and religious or political beliefs.

It was the genius of the 1868 N.C. Constitution which, in Article 9, made clear that a responsibility of state government was to provide for a free public education for all the children of the state, including children who were historically denied that opportunity due to race, religion or financial resources. The state constitution did not include provisions for financing private and religious education with public tax dollars.

North Carolina's Republican and Democrat governors and enlightened leaders of the General Assembly have long championed, if not always well-financed, public education in North Carolina. Rather than divert millions of our tax dollars to unaccountable private and often discriminatory schools, the General Assembly should address the unmet needs of the public schools (mostly rural) across North Carolina, as documented in the long-standing [Leandro case](#).

Embarrassingly, North Carolina now ranks 50th in school funding effort and 48th in overall funding level according to the most recent [Making the Grade report](#) by the Education Law Center. Beginning teacher pay in North Carolina is now below every state in the Southeast, except West Virginia.

North Carolina is now nearly \$12,000 below the national average for teacher pay. Mississippians can now say, "Thank God for NC."

The ideology driving these twin bills is intended to degrade public education. They shift the scales of responsibility from doing what is best for the common good of the people of North Carolina to a self-serving "what's in it for me" – at taxpayer expense.

The great majority of North Carolinians love and support their local public schools and teachers. They also know that a well-educated, civically engaged public is key to creating and sustaining a flourishing state in which to live.

We understand what our nation's Founding Fathers understood, that public education is essential to maintaining a democracy. The diversion of public money to private and religious education not only undermines our public schools, but it also undermines our free and democratic society.

We urge the N.C. General Assembly to reject SB 406 and HB 823.

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