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NATASHA MARCUS: School voucher expansion just 'gravy on a fully-loaded plate of choices'

Thursday, Nov. 21, 2024-- This is not a bill about helping low income families or even about school choice. This is about expanding the program to the wealthiest families. That's who this bill's helping at the expense of all the other things that we need to be spending money on.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The following remarks by Senator Natasha Marcus were delivered on Wednesday, November 20 during Senate debate of House Bill 10 and were originally published by WRAL on November 21.*

I am going to talk about House Bill 10 because I know we've talked about it before, but it's a big issue. It's a lot of money. It affects a lot of families. And passions are pretty high. So I think it needs to be said. There's also some new information that came out on in a report from ProPublica just this week. So maybe you haven't heard about it and I wanted to share some of that as well.

I'll start out by saying that House Bill 10 in my estimation is a massive and expensive and reckless expansion of what the creators of the program like to call Opportunity Scholarships -- also known as private school vouchers. But I have to say opportunity for whom? And opportunity for what?

This ProPublica article that I mentioned that just came out very recently is enlightening. It's disturbing and it talks about how so many of the private schools that are now funded by this voucher program that our legislature's funding and trying to expand today with this veto override were created during the South's desegregation era. And they were specifically created to cater to white parents who wanted to avoid sending their children to racially diverse schools.

It reports that 39 schools in the North Carolina voucher program today were established specifically for white children to avoid desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s, thus earning the moniker "segregation academies." And it's not just their history. It is still their present.

ProPublica concludes that they quote, "play an integral role in perpetuating school segregation and in turn racial segregation in their surrounding communities." Just two examples:

- There's a school in Northampton County. It was founded in the rural part of our state in 1966. Half of its tuition today comes from revenue from the state funded vouchers -- 99% of its students are white, in a county where only 40% of the population is white.
- In Beaufort County there's a school. This is a county where there's only 65% white population but 98% white enrollment in this private school. And that percentage has gotten worse since they started taking voucher money.

Twenty of the 39 schools that are reported on here have 85% or higher white enrollment -- which is not even close to the demographics of the areas where they are located across our state. And they are taking in just these schools \$20 million for just these 39 schools just in the past 3 years alone.

One other disturbing statistic that they shared -- is that the share of black students who have received vouchers from our state has gotten much worse since this program was started in 2014. When this originally was proposed for our state, half of the students receiving vouchers were black. Do you know what the percentage is now? 17%.

So, I am grateful that ProPublica got this information and published it. I wanted to share it with you today because I think it's very relevant when we consider whether this is a bill we want to override the governor's veto on. And it's also important to note that North Carolina state law does not require that this racial information about voucher recipients be made public. So maybe you didn't know, but now you know.

Some other points about this that I think are worth mentioning here. Not only are these schools a means of perpetuating white flight from public schools, but also many of these schools, not all of them but many of them, teach bad science. They teach male supremacy. They teach whitewashed history.

I took time to look at the websites of some of the schools that take this voucher money and rely on it to keep afloat, to see what they're teaching.

One of them, quote: "Our basic textbook is the Bible." They teach that "man came by direct creation of God and not by evolution." That's a quote. They teach that abortion is murder no matter the circumstances, no matter the reasons. They state that same-sex relationships are akin to bestiality. That men shall be the leaders, not women.

So, some may say that those teachings are fine. You might agree with them. And maybe be fine for churches to preach that if that's what they believe. But I don't believe that the majority of North Carolina taxpayers think that those are appropriate tenants of an education for children that is funded, even in part, with public taxpayer dollars.

It's also problematic the way these schools exclude certain kids and certain families -- the ones that they don't want. They exclude or expel kids with learning delays or disabilities because they often don't have the time or the expertise to educate those children. They exclude or expel kids with behavioral issues or kids whose families can't afford the cost of lunch or transportation to and from school. Because, of course, those expenses are covered by public schools, they have to be, but not by these private schools.

Twenty four of the top 25 schools that take the most money from the voucher programs are based on Christianity. One is Muslim. And 3/4 of all voucher-funded schools are religious schools. Almost all Christian. I think many people agree with me that this feels like an overt violation of the American principle of separation of church and state -- for us to use taxpayer money to fund church-based schools.

And again, I looked at some of what they espouse based on that or what they require of their students and what they reject as a student. Based on that, you have one school talks about how you have to have a letter of recommendation from your pastor for your child. And each student must be a born again Christians professing a personal relationship with Christ. They exclude kids with gay parents. They don't even recognize the marriage of those kids' parents. And they exclude kids who challenge their religious teaching or articles of faith.

So, all those kinds of kids -- they can't use these vouchers. But they are welcome at public school. And those public schools are underfunded and consistently degraded and scorned by this body which is supposed to represent all the families of North Carolina. And care that all kids get their sound basic education as guaranteed by the North Carolina State Constitution.

And it's also problematic that to cover up the questionable quality of the education that some of these schools provide ... the General Assembly continues to allow them to remain largely unregulated and unaccountable. And they're not ensuring that there is a quality education where the kids are learning the basics and are prepared for college and the 21st century.

Public schools, boy do we collect a lot of data there, right? We require that teachers be licensed. We test the kids every other day, it feels like. That has to be made public. We give the schools a letter grade based on how they do. We hold teachers accountable and set the amount of their salary based on how the kids are performing. So many checks. So much data. All of it public.

Private schools? Nope -- almost no rules. Teachers don't have to be certified. There's no required curriculum. There's very little data collected and even less data that's made public. There's no letter grades for the schools. Some are rated based on third party sites that decide to do this work for parents if they want to know what kind of a school they might be sending their kid to. But many of these schools that take voucher money aren't even on those third party sites. Parents are going in blind. And this body doesn't seem to care about whether these kids are getting a good education with the money that we are funding.

There's also ... very little oversight to track the money that goes to these schools. We've talked before about how some have accepted many more vouchers than they have enrolled students at any given time. Some (have) been caught embezzling pretty big amounts of money -- one of which was the top, the #1 voucher recipient in the state at one point when it was found there was a major embezzlement happening there. And then this this bill that we're talking about today is going to balloon the program and the cost of it. It could have addressed some of these oversight problems, but it doesn't. There's no changes whatsoever to what we expect private schools to do in return for all this money that we're getting ready to send them.

And let's be clear, we cannot afford this. Please remember your usual inclination toward fiscal responsibility. Don't set it aside in order to fund this bill. This is a budget busting expense that more than doubles the already significant voucher program in North Carolina.

The Office of State Budget and Management has forecasted a budget shortfall in the near future due to the tax cuts we've already passed and the impacts of earlier expansion of the voucher program and the Helene funding that we should be focused on.

Rural counties stand to lose a lot here. There's a lot of reporting in this ProPublica about that and how damaging this will be to rural counties. In 2014, this program cost \$14 million. It seemed like a lot of money then. At that point, there were 1,200 low income students who got a voucher. That was 2014.

But, boy that camel's nose got under the tent. And that was the start of this major disruption to our once lauded public school education. North Carolina was the education state. We were doing things right. We were the model in the Southeast. Do you remember?

This is a huge expansion now over the past 10 years. House Bill 10 is going to cost us an extra \$463 million just this year. That's almost half a billion dollars. It's going to cost a total of \$625 million for the next school year. And between now and ... 2031, the vouchers are going to cost about \$5 billion. Maybe more.

... I'll jump to my final point. Which is -- Please remember this is not a bill about helping low income families or even about school choice. This is about expanding the program to the wealthiest families in our state. Nearly one quarter of the people that stand to benefit make more than \$259,000 a year for a family of four. That's who this bill's helping at the expense of all the other things that we need to be spending money on.

It is just gravy on an already fully loaded dinner plate of choices and it costs us nearly half a billion dollars this year and \$5 billion more over the next 7 years. I hope you'll join me in voting to uphold the governor's veto of this terrible, terrible bill.

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