



Education Groups Respond to GEER Funding Announcement

South Carolina, July 21, 2020 – During yesterday's press conference at Hampton Park Christian School, Governor McMaster stated that "education is the most important thing we do in South Carolina, or anywhere else." We wholeheartedly agree. However, his decision to allocate \$32 million—67% of his \$48 million of CARES Act relief discretionary funds—toward private and religious schools undermines both his words and Congress's intent. To say we are disappointed is an understatement.

The Governor's Safe Access to Flexible Education (SAFE) grants are nothing more than an executive branch voucher scheme. For years, special interest groups and some legislators have worked to advance private school voucher programs through the General Assembly under the guise of Education Scholarship Accounts. These voucher programs rob public schools of necessary funding, produce, at best, no gains in academic achievement, and reallocate public dollars to a system that lacks accountability and transparency.

Simply put, SAFE grants will not serve the state's most vulnerable children. Just 5,000 vouchers are available to families living at up to 300% of the federal poverty level (\$78,600 for a family of four), an incomprehensibly expansive definition of poverty given that a staggering 180,000, or 23%, of our most vulnerable students live at just 100% of the federal poverty level (\$26,200 for a family of four). Second, transportation to and from these schools remains an insurmountable barrier for many in poverty, particularly in rural areas. Lastly, though this is hardly a comprehensive list of the many ways in which this voucher program is problematic, those 180,000 children will likely find it impossible, despite a \$6,500 voucher, to cover the total cost of attending many of the state's most successful private schools.

Despite the General Assembly's decade-long failure to fund public schools at the level required by law, the Governor is taking advantage of a pandemic to advance this unpopular, highly partisan program. For the second time in a week, the Governor is invoking our most vulnerable and at-risk students and families in the name of a political agenda that, time and again, has turned a blind eye to the evidence-based tools they need to succeed.

The money Governor McMaster just gifted to private schools would have gone a long way toward helping our high-poverty districts and schools provide nurses, social workers, and counselors to address the social and emotional needs with which our students will no doubt arrive at school this fall. Educators have rightly demanded this support: they know we can't educate our students if we aren't able to meet their most basic needs. Rather than use every available resource to expand broadband access and invest in safety measures and wraparound services, the Governor is choosing to fund a political experiment.

Make no mistake: privatization efforts couched in the language of equity are part of a larger, well-organized effort to destabilize public education. If we underfund, ridicule, and stigmatize our public schools enough, we create a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure from which only the school choice proponents can "save" us. Yesterday's executive action lays the groundwork for future legislative attempts to preserve and expand private school voucher programs.

We say enough is enough. 92% of school-aged children in South Carolina depend on public schools. The Governor's action robs the many to benefit the few. We pledge to channel our disappointment by doing everything in our collective power to defend and elevate South Carolina's students, teachers, and public schools.