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Memo: Missouri Forum Article on the School Vouchers
To: Editors
From: Charles Klotzer, Chair of the Editorial Committee

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EDITOR'S NOTE: A version of this op-ed previously appeared in the Springfield News-Leader.

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Vouchers By Any Name Hurt Public Schools
By Stephen Kleinsmith, Ed.D.

My parents chose to send me to a private Catholic school during my elementary school years, and my in-laws chose to send my wife to a private Catholic school for her entire K-12 experience. Both sets of parents had large families to support with a very limited income. Yet, their overwhelming desire to assure their children had a single-religious-belief education in a private-school setting influenced them to provide us with what they perceived as an opportunity. Sacrifices were made to make this happen. I do believe that parents should be able to direct the religious upbringing of their children but not with the financial assistance from the government.

I have been a school administrator at a private school and at no time then, or now as a public school administrator, have I ever felt it appropriate to use public money for religious, that is to say private, purposes. Actually, most private school administrators don't want the "strings" attached. Simply put, we know that public money must be spent for public purposes and that the privilege of choosing a private, religious education is a personal matter that our government should stay out of.

Private schools exist for private purposes and should not be given preferential tax status. Siphoning tax dollars out of federal or state coffers defies good common sense for a number of reasons. First, government-funded Title I outlays can reach no more than half of the disadvantaged children eligible for extra help in reading and math. Second, the government's commitment to special education falls tens of billions of dollars short of what was promised in 1975. Finally, we still have children in our great state of Missouri who must daily endure dilapidated buildings that are at worst unsafe and at best detrimental learning environments.

Needy children should be entitled to the services these programs provide. Offering tax break entitlements or vouchers to adults does not help children and is clearly unfair.

I oppose any initiative containing any form of vouchers for private K-12 tuition. Vouchers or their kin (i.e. tuition tax credits) would reduce general revenue that would otherwise be available for public education

funding and divert funds to private religious schools over which the taxpayer has no oversight.

Vouchers do not expand parents' choices. Private schools choose whom to admit and may deny admission to anyone, especially children with costly special needs such as a learning or physical disability or limited English proficiency. Public schools have an "open-door policy." Every child who enters through our doors is accepted.

In addition, vouchers undermine accountability. Public schools are required to meet academic achievement and teacher quality standards, maintain open meetings and release data such as attendance, graduation, dropout rates and test scores. Private schools are not similarly accountable to the taxpayers who pay for vouchers, either directly through public funding or indirectly through tax credits.

Finally, it is bad tax policy to reward taxpayers for their choice to forgo publicly funded services.

Government provides public services for the benefit of all members of society. Taxpayers may not choose which of these services their tax dollars will support and be reimbursed for their decision to boycott these public services.

For example, taxpayers who buy books should not receive a tax rebate for not patronizing the public library. Nor should taxpayers who vacation at resorts receive tax rebates because they choose not to visit our national parks. Likewise, taxpayers who decide against sending their children to public school should not be rewarded with tax refunds for tuition.

Kleinsmith is the superintendent of schools for the Nixa R-II School
District.

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