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On Vouchers: BESE Should Adopt Stronger Accountability Standards

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Today, the Board of Elementary & Secondary Education (BESE) will consider [a proposed criteria and accountability system](#) for school participation in the Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence Program, the state's school voucher program. The program was created as part of a massive education reform bill that passed the Legislature during the spring 2012 session.

In March BGR issued a report on school vouchers, [Making Choice Right: Can Private School Vouchers Live Up to their Promises?](#) The report surveyed practices around the country and made recommendations to improve the school voucher proposal.

What promises should vouchers live up to? At the most basic level, vouchers promise students the opportunity to attend private schools that are better than the public schools they would otherwise attend.

But not all private schools are good schools.

In order to deliver on vouchers' promise, the state must limit the universe of participating private schools to those that meet higher standards than the public schools from which their voucher students transfer. It must also ensure that private schools help their voucher students to perform at an acceptable level.

The proposed accountability system before BESE would do neither. It has no specific academic performance standards for schools that average less than 10 voucher students

per grade and fewer than 40 students in tested grades. Schools with higher enrollments of voucher students are given a “Scholarship Cohort Index” based on the performance of their voucher students. For a school to face any sanction for academic nonperformance, its index would have to fall below 50. In other words, its voucher students would have to be performing at an F level.

More broadly, the proposed system calls on BESE to conduct periodic reviews of participating private schools. It allows BESE to penalize a school, but only after it “is found to have demonstrated gross or persistent lack of basic academic competence.”

Short of no accountability standards at all, it is difficult to imagine a lower standard of performance than what the proposed system offers. Yet the proposal also allows waivers in some circumstances.

The weak accountability standards are illogical. Under Louisiana’s voucher program, students attending public schools with grades of C, D or F can receive vouchers. In order to receive voucher students, a public school must be rated A or B. If the state considers C, D and F public schools undeserving of voucher students, then it should deem private schools of that quality undeserving of them as well. Voucher students should attend schools of demonstrably higher quality, and those schools should be able to ensure that participating students perform collectively at a high level.

BESE should amend the proposed accountability system to hold participating schools to a higher standard. Otherwise, the state will run a very real risk of throwing taxpayer money away – and wasting precious years of children’s education.