

It is no secret that Oklahoma is facing one of the biggest budget shortfalls in the history of the state. It is also no secret that this budget shortfall is drastically impacting state agencies that provide needed services to Oklahoma citizens; including the department of education, which is taking the brunt of the budget shortfall.

As our legislators prepare to resume their duties in February, it is important that Oklahoma public education leaders and organizations that serve and represent them do the children of Oklahoma justice by standing up for legislation that promotes *equality*. At the core of public education, is a system created to serve EVERY child, no matter race, religion, or disability.

School vouchers, will once again be introduced and touted by lawmakers and their proponents as a way to improve education in Oklahoma. There is not an educator in Oklahoma who doesn't want to improve education services to *all* Oklahoma children, but vouchers simply do not promote equality.

For example if the state gives a child \$4400 to attend a private school and the private school does not have the same state and federal reporting standards or testing standards as public schools, there is no way in which you can fairly evaluate how the \$4400 is being used to serve the student; there is no measurement and accountability, all of which is required of public schools.

Another reason vouchers do not promote equality is that they continue to erode school funding and reduce educational standards in a time when cash strapped school districts across the state cannot afford additional cuts. This leaves public school districts left with trying to provide existing and new educational services with fewer financial resources all while being held to the same level of accountability.

The United Suburban Schools Association represents over 350,000 Oklahoma public school students, primarily in large, suburban school districts. USSA members firmly support that all schools accepting public money shall be expected to participate by the same standards and rules as the state's public schools.

Our children deserve nothing less than the best education. We cannot continue to deplete the financial resources that serve to support the foundation of who we are as a state and a nation. It is time we stand up for the equality of EVERY Oklahoma child!

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