Dear Chair Burgess and Ranking Member McGovern:

The 33 undersigned organizations of the National Coalition for Public Education write to oppose the inclusion of any provisions or amendments to the FY2025 National Defense Authorization Act that would create a private school voucher program for military-connected students or for families. Vouchers undermine the quality of education for military-connected students.

In particular, we oppose the provision in the base bill that would create a voucher program for families stationed in Bahrain who attend Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools (sec. 572) and we support Rep. Jill Tokuda’s amendment (#636) which would strip the voucher school provision from the underlying bill. We also oppose Amendment #526, filed by Rep. Glenn Grothman, because it would create a voucher program (called Education Savings Accounts) for any military-connected students.

Bahrain Provision
The voucher proposed in section 572(c) is structured as a pilot program serving 30 students in Bahrain. The Bahrain voucher would open the door to stripping students of First Amendment, due process and other constitutional and statutory rights. School vouchers also lack academic and fiscal accountability, which makes fraud and abuse more likely—especially in cases like this, where funds would be going to schools or institutions outside the purview of the United States.

DoDEA schools are required to abide by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which provides a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities. Many private schools in Bahrain do not have special education programs. DoDEA’s Bahrain schools are the only ones with special education teachers certified in the United States. Moreover, all private schools in Bahrain are subject to local laws on what topics can be taught with dire consequences in the arts and social studies—the most striking example being a prohibition on teaching the Holocaust. Additionally, private schools often refuse to fail students in a “pay to pass dynamic.”

The program proposed in section 572 may be, for now, only a pilot serving 30 students. However, even starting with a small or “pilot” voucher program could usher in cuts that could balloon and ultimately undermine DoDEA schools. We have seen voucher proponents regularly propose small or targeted programs and then work to greatly expand them, even when the pilot
program doesn't produce the results that proponents claimed they would, such as the DC voucher program. In fact, that's what voucher proponents are pushing for with this program. In an op-ed, proponents of the Bahrain voucher programs said that the “amendment could create a precedent for extending [vouchers] to the children of all military service members.”

**Grothman Amendment**

Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) are no different than traditional private school vouchers—they transfer funding that would ordinarily support students attending public schools into an account for students to use on other education expenses, including private school tuition. Like vouchers, ESAs divert desperately needed resources away from the public school system to fund the education of a few, select students in alternative settings. In particular, this amendment would take away critical funding from DoDEA schools and school districts serving the majority of military-connected students and funnel those federal dollars to private and unaccountable education providers for families who can already afford a private school education for their child. This would undermine the public school systems that educate the majority of military-connected students.

Military-connected students face unique challenges due to frequent relocations as well as the absence of parents who may be deployed overseas. These challenges are recognized by public school districts through coordinated academic transfer agreements in every state, as well as comprehensive systems of support for students, including professional development for school counselors, to ensure a safe and healthy learning environment. A redirection of additional resources away from public schools and especially DoDEA schools through any type of voucher program will only make it more difficult—if not impossible—for public/DoDEA schools to appropriately meet the needs of military-connected students and their families.

Fourth- and eighth-grade students attending DoDEA schools led the nation in scoring on the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and mathematics assessments. If DoDEA were a state, its test scores would make it the highest performing one in the United States. Thus, claims that families attending these schools need “better” educational options fall flat. In fact, repeated studies of voucher programs across the country show that vouchers result in worse test scores for students, and the negative impact is on par with that of natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina.

Although promoted as “school choice,” private school vouchers do not provide real choice to military connected students and parents. The “choice” in voucher programs actually lies with the private schools, which may turn students away for a variety of reasons, often including disability, sexual orientation and gender identity, religion, academic achievement, and economic status. Students with disabilities are especially underserved by voucher programs. Voucher schools do not provide the same quantity and quality of services available to students with disabilities in public schools, including those mandated under each student’s individualized education program. Voucher schools often deny students with disabilities admission or subject them to inappropriate or excessive suspensions or expulsions. This discrimination should not be paid for with taxpayer funds.
For these reasons and more, NCPE opposes any provision in NDAA that would create a private school voucher program for any military-connected child. For more information about the impact of private school vouchers, please see the resources on our website or contact the co-chairs, Sasha Pudelski (spudelski@aasa.org) and Nicole Fuller (nfuller@ncld.org).

Thank you for your consideration of our views.

Sincerely,

AASA, The School Superintendents Association
AESA Association of Educational Service Agencies
AFL-CIO
AFT, AFL-CIO
American Atheists
American Civil Liberties Union
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)
Americans United for Separation of Church and State
Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO)
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC)
Center for Inquiry (CFI)
Clearinghouse on Women's Issues
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF)
Council for Exceptional Children
Council of Administrators of Special Education
Council of the Great City Schools
Feminist Majority Foundation
First Focus Campaign for Children
GLSEN
In the Public Interest
Learning Disabilities Association of America
National Association of Federally Impacted Schools (NAFIS)
National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
National Center for Learning Disabilities
National Council of Jewish Women
National Education Association
National PTA
National School Boards Association
People For the American Way
Public Advocacy for Kids (PAK)
Public Funds Public Schools
The Arc of the United States
The Secular Coalition for America

CC:
The Honorable Mike Johnson, Speaker of the House of Representatives
The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries, Minority Leader
The Honorable Virginia Foxx, House Education and Workforce Chair
The Honorable Bobby Scott, House Education and Workforce Ranking Member