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ATPE: Supplemental Special Education Services Program amounts to a voucher program

Gov. Greg Abbott is ignoring legislative intent with this use of coronavirus relief funds

AUSTIN, Texas—**The Association of Texas Professional Educators** (ATPE)—the largest association for educators in Texas—believes the new Supplemental Special Education Services (SSES) program announced by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) Oct. 21 amounts to instituting a voucher program without legislative input or oversight during a time when the Texas public education system already faces unprecedented challenges.

The SSES program is strikingly similar to previous voucher-like privatization proposals, including “education savings accounts” or ESAs, that have been consistently rejected by Texas lawmakers. The program, which will enable parents of students with special needs to apply for \$1,500 grants for supplemental educational services, is to be funded with \$30 million in federal coronavirus relief funding appropriated by Congress through the CARES Act earlier this year. The funds are part of a \$307 million grant via the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief fund, over which Gov. Greg Abbott has authority with little to no state legislative oversight required.

The federal GEER funds were designed to be “highly flexible,” according to U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, who has been a vocal proponent of federally funded vouchers. The streamlined, 15-page application for the GEER funds was essentially an “agree-sign-submit” format with a short questionnaire on how the state intended to use the funds. No public comment period or state legislative oversight was required. In the certification and agreement that Abbott’s office sent to the Education Department earlier this year, there is no mention of using the GEER funds for vouchers.

ATPE members have long opposed using taxpayer dollars to fund private school vouchers, including ESA programs in which there is little oversight of how the money is ultimately spent.

“ATPE is extremely disappointed the governor has made the unilateral decision to spend our state’s GEER funds in such a manner,” said Shannon Holmes, ATPE executive director. “Not only does this action ignore the Legislature’s clear opposition to vouchers, but also it denies public schools access to this \$30 million allocation. Public schools are better positioned to equitably and efficiently provide for the needs of all students with disabilities.”

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About the Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE)

Founded in 1980, ATPE is the leading educators’ association in Texas with approximately 100,000 members statewide. With its strong collaborative philosophy, ATPE speaks for classroom teachers, administrators, and future, retired, and para-educators and works to create better opportunities for Texas’ five million public school students. | atpe.org

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