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The Record: Can't vouch for this

THE RECORD

RIDDLE US this: When is a voucher not a voucher? When lawmakers call it a scholarship. As in "opportunity scholarship," in a bill proposed by state Sens. Raymond Lesniak, D-Union, and Thomas Kean Jr., R-Union, and supported by Governor Christie.

The measure would create a scholarship program for low-income students enrolled in chronically failing public schools, who could apply for and use the funds to attend private, parochial or public schools elsewhere. Corporations would donate the funds to state-approved non-profit agencies, which would distribute the money to students via lottery. Those corporate donors would then be repaid by taxpayers, through a dollar-for-dollar state tax break.

It is a voucher system only Rube Goldberg could invent. These "contributions" and "scholarships" are clumsy euphemisms, and the non-profit pass-through sounds an awful lot like a bag man. What will we hear of next — that the money will be distributed by Reform Jersey Now, the 501(c)(4) run by GOP stalwarts that is accepting unlimited and, so far, untraceable donations to promote Christie's agenda?

Supporters say the bill will rescue students from failing public schools, because it will remove the economic barriers that prevent parents from making a better choice. But in its most recent iteration, S-1872 allows low-income families who already pay for private or parochial schools to qualify for vouchers, though it limits spending on those students to 25 percent of the total.

Within five years, the program could cost up to \$120 million a year — including \$30 million to subsidize students whose families currently pay their way. It is unconscionable for state lawmakers to begin subsidizing private and religious schools while approving \$820 million in public school cuts this year alone.

We cannot support taxpayer-funded vouchers — no matter what lawmakers call them. Vouchers take money out of the public school system, which is bound by law to educate all children who enroll, and invest it instead in private institutions, which can pick and choose their students. Using taxpayer dollars to pay for religious education violates the Constitution's establishment clause, which prohibits government from financially supporting a religion. This bill would do both.

Lawmakers are adjusting the proposal; an expected replacement bill would include only communities that specifically volunteer to take part as sending and receiving districts, along with private and parochial schools. On top of the legal and moral hazards this plan presents, we wonder what schools or districts, if any, would sign up. As originally written, the bill appears to promise private, parochial or other public schools \$9,000 or less per student — less than the per-pupil costs at most schools and districts, and hardly an economic incentive to take on students struggling to make up for years of lackluster education.

We support school choice through magnet public and charter schools, because they provide an opportunity to experiment and expand educational variety within the public school system. They are stable, can increase competition and provide justice for families who live near unsafe or ineffective public schools. Market-minded lawmakers should dedicate themselves to improving the charter school law and passing S-1073, which would formally establish the experimental inter-district school choice pilot program, which expired five years ago.

Instead of subsidizing tuition for current private school students, why not spend that \$30 million on out-of-town busing to top-flight public schools, or on building repairs to help new charter schools get off the ground?



Inside Clifton charter school.