

According to the special interests running the show for Republicans at the State Capitol these days, the next priority of the Iowa Legislature will be vouchers that siphon funding from public schools and give it to home schools and private schools.

They convinced a Republican Senator to introduce their bill and it may get a hearing yet this week. Their plan will take away over \$200 million from public schools and shift it to home schools and private schools instead. If it's approved, the end result will be a disaster -- school closings, higher class sizes, and fewer opportunities for the 482,000 Iowa kids in public schools.

While many Iowans are just taking note this year, the special interests behind the voucher movement in Iowa, who call it "school choice," have been quietly laying the groundwork for years. They created an "alliance" of local and national private school, homeschool, and voucher advocates. They started coordinating efforts, lined up other corporate special interest groups, and hired a lobbyist to raise and then donate tens of thousands of dollars to Republican lawmakers.

In 2013, voucher advocates held public school funding hostage in the Legislature and demanded radical reforms on homeschooling in Iowa. Now homeschool students are completely exempt from reporting data to local schools districts and they can even skip tests that examine proficiency. Today, there's virtually no state oversight over homeschool students.

The initial investment by the alliance paid off again when two Republican lawmakers -- Rep. Peter Cownie and Rep. Chris Hagenow - - offered one of the first voucher bills (they call them "Education Savings Accounts") that allowed students to take the state per pupil money invested for them in public schools and transfer it for use at a private, religious, or home school instead. A few years later, their investment tripled when Rep. Hagenow became the House Majority Leader, a position he still has today.

Fast forward to this year and Republicans are in full control of the Statehouse. The special interest alliance backing vouchers got more good news when President Trump picked billionaire Betsy DeVos to be his Secretary of Education. She's personally invested millions backing the voucher movement across the country and served as President of the American Federation for Children (AFC). It also turns out the AFC is one of the partners in the voucher alliance created here in Iowa.

While the special interests behind the voucher alliance are certainly troubling, the idea of shifting money from public schools to homeschools and private schools instead is just bad public policy for Iowa.

A Des Moines Register poll out this week found Iowans overwhelmingly oppose vouchers and that's largely because Iowans take great pride in our public schools. 92% of Iowa kids attend public schools and by most measures, our public schools are performing well given the scant state investment from Republicans for the last 7 years. We've got the highest graduation rate in the country and we rank near the top in college

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readiness tests.

There's also a growing body of research that prove vouchers just don't work. In Indiana, researchers found kids who used vouchers to transfer from public schools to private schools lost ground in math and saw zero improvement in reading. Another study in Louisiana found students there lost ground in both reading and math. Similar results were found yet again in a separate study of vouchers in Ohio.

So here's the good news. So far, the voucher bill hasn't made it out of a House or Senate committee this year. If it doesn't make it out of committee by Friday, March 3rd it will be "dead" for the year. That means we can stop this bill from becoming law and protect our public schools.

If you haven't already, you should contact your local lawmakers and tell them NO vouchers. Not in Iowa. Not this year. Not ever!

