



A Trojan Horse to Divert Public Funds to Private Schools

By Nancy Loome

The Children's Promise Act – it has a nice ring. When legislators were told the law would benefit children in foster care, they adopted it with few questions asked. In reality, the legislation was a Trojan horse intended to create a publicly-funded revenue stream for private schools.

Mississippi's Constitution states plainly that the Legislature's obligation regarding K-12 education is to fund a system of public schools, free and open to all children. Our Constitution prohibits the use of state funds to subsidize private schools – or any school that charges tuition.

Undeterred, a few Mississippi lawmakers have taken pains – at times deceitfully so – to funnel state funds to private schools, in defiance of that constitutional mandate.

Voucher supporters devised the Children's Promise Act, telling their legislative colleagues it would provide tax credits for donations to organizations that contract with our state's Child Protection Services agency to house and serve children in foster care (Baptist Children's Village, Methodist Children's Home, etc.). Who could argue with that?

Omitted from their explanation was that the Children's Promise Act directed half of the dollar-for-dollar tax credits, not to the benefit of foster care organizations, but to the benefit of private schools – schools not required to serve foster children. Crafty authors used careful wording to ensure that virtually any private school would qualify for the funds while giving the appearance of benevolence toward children with some disadvantage. For example, a private school is eligible for the maximum benefit of \$405,000 annually if only one child who has a "chronic illness or disability" is enrolled. That could be attention deficit disorder, asthma, or an allergy. Last year, 90 private schools qualified. The state has no record of the number of disadvantaged children currently enrolled in those schools.

Past attempts to amend the law to direct all of the program's tax credits to foster care services organizations have been swatted down, making clear that legislative backers' priority is public revenue for private schools, not Mississippi's most vulnerable children.

Little benevolence is required on the part of Children's Promise Act donors, who get a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for contributions to their private schools, reducing that taxpayer's tax liability by the donation amount. The private school gets the entire donation, with no accountability to the public who is footing the bill, while the state revenue available to fund our public schools and other public services is diminished.

This Trojan horse isn't a school choice measure. Unlike vouchers and school choice programs that purport to add choices for students, it doesn't bother with pretense. It's a straightforward government-funded subsidy for private schools that have no duty to admit new students via the tax credits.

Private schools simply get big chunks of the money intended for state coffers with zero obligation on the part of the school. No new students, no spending audits, no academic standards, no oversight whatsoever.

Not surprisingly, the Children's Promise Act's unencumbered revenue stream is private schools' preferred means of receiving state funds, unburdened by expectations or public scrutiny. Also not surprisingly, the legislators who concocted the plan have made annual attempts to raise the cap on the millions in state dollars flowing to private schools through these tax credits.

With more than \$37-million in state funds diverted to private schools through the Children's Promise Act to date, perhaps taxpayers deserve some accountability, starting with audits to determine just how many disadvantaged children are being served in the schools that benefit from the program.

Senators should be lauded for defeating the massive increase that was attempted for this program in the 2024 session, but they will need to remain vigilant. More tax credits for private schools could pop up anywhere at any time. The Trojan horse jockeys are wily and determined.

###

Nancy Loomer is executive director of The Parents' Campaign (msparentscampaign.org) and president of The Parents' Campaign Research & Education Fund (tpcref.org). She and her husband Jim have three grown children, all of whom graduated from Clinton Public Schools.