Dear Elected Official:

As your constituent, I urge you to vote against the proposed expansion of school vouchers in Tennessee through the Education Freedom Scholarship Act.

This is a costly unproven government spending program that will take away money from public school systems across our state at the same time that tax revenues are flattening for both state and local governments. Ultimately, because the program eventually would not be based on family income and student need, vouchers would benefit mostly families who are already enrolled in private schools - and hurt families that remain in public schools, whether in urban, suburban, or rural districts.

As a person of faith in the United Methodist Church, I believe that the right to education can “best be fulfilled through public elementary and secondary schools and to post-secondary schools of their choice. (The United Methodist Social Principles ¶ 164.E).”

And the needs in public schools are substantial. Communities of educators and support staff have increasingly been tasked with responsibilities to address growing societal challenges for children in crisis. We need greater support, not less, for children and teachers in rural and urban public school systems to make sure that all students have access to quality education. Families who want to send their children to private or religious schools have the right to do so but not with taxpayer dollars that are intended for the public good.

We are extremely concerned at the latest push to expand vouchers when Tennessee’s Education Savings Account Pilot Program, now in only its third year of operation, has not had adequate time to demonstrate whether it can be academically effective and is reaching the students who proponents said the program was supposed to serve. In fact, early evidence shows that students in the pilot program’s first year underperformed by 19 percentage points in Math and ELA compared to their counterparts in public schools.

Meanwhile the list of needs are great in our public schools – from student mental health to wraparound services to support economically disadvantaged students to compensation packages that will attract more highly effective teachers to a noble profession.

As part of the church’s call to assist the most vulnerable members of society, we are especially grieved that private voucher schools, unlike public schools, are not required to enroll or adequately serve students with disabilities or low-income students. And despite the fact that federal laws prohibit discrimination on the basis of national origin in public education, the bill, as amended would exclude undocumented families from participating.

Please do not invest over $144 million per year in state funding on an expensive, unproven, ineffective, and discriminatory school voucher program.

Sincerely,

[First Name] [Last Name]

[Your Address]