



Palmetto State Teachers Association

Press Releases

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The Palmetto State Teachers Association has filed an *amicus curiae* brief in support of the plaintiff in the case of *Adams v. McMaster*. The brief argues that Governor McMaster violated Section 4 of Article XI of the South Carolina Constitution when he directed \$32 million from the Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) fund for the creation of the SAFE grant scholarship program for students attending private schools in South Carolina. As a result, the Palmetto State Teachers Association supports the plaintiff's request for a permanent injunction against the Governor's SAFE grant program.

The express language of the South Carolina Constitution prohibits the use of "public funds" for "the direct benefit of any religious or other private educational institution." For over a decade, advocates for voucher programs in South Carolina have failed to advance their goals in the General Assembly, and the Governor's attempt to redirect federal relief funds to create vouchers is an unconstitutional action that circumvents the legislative process in our state by providing material aid to private schools from public funds. In addition, our association is disappointed by the Governor's decision to funnel two-thirds of the money available through the GEER fund to private schools during the midst of a pandemic that has created unprecedented challenges for our state's public schools and universities.

In filing an *amicus* brief in the *Adams* case, the Palmetto State Teachers Association continues to advocate for the state of South Carolina to fully and equitably fund public education, consistent with the state government's obligation under the state constitution.



The Palmetto State Teachers Association is disappointed in Governor McMaster's decision to direct \$32 million in federal GEER (Governor's Emergency Education Relief) funding to the new "SAFE grant" scholarship program. At a time where South Carolina's public schools are faced with unprecedented operational challenges due to the coronavirus pandemic, these funds could be better used by ensuring our public schools have as many resources as possible to ensure a safe return to in-person instruction when public health conditions make it possible to do so.

As an organization, the Palmetto State Teachers Association strongly supports public school choice, so long as the schools receiving public funding are required to meet the same requirements for accountability and accessibility as our state's public schools. However, today's action by the Governor will allow federal public dollars to flow to independent schools that are not subject to public accountability standards. These schools are also not accessible to all South Carolina students, as they can deny admission to students based on criteria such as a student's religion, sexual orientation, or disability status. The federal tax dollars used for the SAFE grant program are paid by all South Carolinians, meaning those dollars should only be used for schools that are open to all of our students.

Palmetto State Teachers Association has traditionally advocated against the establishment of any voucher program in South Carolina, and while the SAFE grant program is only for one year, it still has the hallmarks of a voucher system that diverts public dollars from public schools. Our state's allocation of GEER funding could be better served supporting schools and educational programs that are truly public and for all South Carolinians.



In the midst of a generational crisis, the state of South Carolina desperately needs sound and steady leadership that is focused on ensuring the health and well-being of all South Carolinians. The Palmetto State Teachers Association categorically opposes Governor McMaster's push for all school districts in South Carolina to operate in-person instruction, five days a week, without regard for the status of the coronavirus pandemic when schools are scheduled to resume.

We applaud the Governor's call for districts to move back their scheduled start date until after Labor Day, as we believe this will give our state more time to slow the spread of the coronavirus pandemic in our state. However, we also believe that if health conditions do *not* improve, it would be irresponsible and dangerous to require a return to full in-person instruction.

We believe this action would needlessly jeopardize the health and safety of our state's 800,000 students and more than 50,000 teachers. According to DHEC, there were 16 positive cases of COVID-19 in our state on March 16th, the first day that all schools in South Carolina were closed by order of the Governor. Yesterday, DHEC reported 2,205 positive cases in our state- a 13,681% increase in positive cases compared to March 16th. While we know more now than we did in March about how COVID-19 is spread and contained, the current rate of spread of COVID-19 in our state makes a return to full in-person instruction far more dangerous than it was when the Governor ordered schools to close in March.

While the members of PSTA desperately want to return to in-person instruction at the earliest possible time, the continued high rate of spread of the coronavirus poses a significant, and potentially deadly, health risk for students and staff. As a result, our organization strongly agrees with Senator Peeler's statement that what we need is a "safe return" to school. In order to achieve that safe return, we believe districts should follow the recommendations of the AccelerateED task force. According to that report, schools should operate in a distance learning model as long as the rate of spread of COVID-19, as measured by DHEC, is "high" in a county. Currently, 45 of our 46 counties fall into that category.

We hope that our state leaders will take the steps necessary to slow the spread of COVID-19 in our state. Once we achieve that goal, a return to in-person instruction is what is best for students and desired by teachers. Until that time, such an action needlessly endangers the health of our state's most precious resource- our children.

Palmetto State Teachers Association
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