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CHARTER SCHOOL BUDGET PROVISION TO BENEFIT SPECIAL INTERESTS

Nearly \$2 Million Will Divide Rural Communities

Raleigh, NC—June 12, 2013—Public Schools First NC is deeply troubled by a new House budget provision that will devastate traditional public schools in rural communities by diverting resources to unproven charter schools. The funds will target underfunded rural school districts in Vance, Warren, Nash, Halifax, Northampton, Chowan, Bertie, Pitt, Edgecombe, Martin, Sampson, Bladen, Robeson, Hoke and Scotland Counties. As students leave traditional public schools to attend untested charter schools, local and state funds will go with them, forcing local school districts to lay off teachers and cut other critical school programs.

“It is critical to understand the root causes of problems in rural areas,” stated Yevonne Brannon, Chair, Public Schools First NC. “Programs that bring in outside competition to try and solve issues closely linked to poverty will not address student success. What our traditional public schools need are real resources, not divisive competition.”

The provision, “Rural Charter School Development Program,” would give nearly \$1 million in taxpayer funds directly to school “choice” lobbyists, Parents for Educational Freedom NC (PEFNC). The funds would subsidize the establishment of up to 12 rural charter schools. The provision also indicates that PEFNC would match state funds dollar-for-dollar—meaning that as much as \$2 million in funds, or approximately \$155,000 on each of the twelve schools, could be spent. The sources of PEFNC’s matching dollars are unknown, but the group has many out-of-state funders who support school vouchers and other efforts to privatize public education.

The PAC associated with Parents for Educational Freedom NC, gave \$16,784 in 2012 campaign contributions to the Governor and members of the General Assembly. In March 2012, PEFNC sponsored a trip for 11 North Carolina lawmakers to visit Florida to learn about school vouchers. This year the House Budget includes funding for school vouchers (“opportunity scholarships”).

Public Schools First NC questions the budget provision for several reasons:

- Instead of providing resources needed in our underfunded rural school systems, the provision creates unnecessary and unfair competition for tax dollars. Underlying issues in rural counties such as high rates of child poverty and difficulty retaining teachers are not being addressed.
- Charter schools are presumed to be a panacea, yet thirty-four of North Carolina's 100 charter schools failed to meet annual measurable objectives (2011-12). National research shows that traditional public schools outperform charter schools.
- Rather than serving as labs of innovation and best practices that can be transferred to traditional public schools, these rural charters are being funded to effectively put traditional schools out of business.
- A blank check is being written to PEFNC without a clear understanding of what qualifies them to perform this work, the scope of this effort, and how the outcome will be evaluated for taxpayers. Why isn't there a competitive bid process to ensure that highly qualified, cost effective vendors are awarded this work?

Public Schools First NC understands the challenges of attracting excellent teachers to rural communities. Creating what is essentially a second school system in smaller communities is highly inefficient and will only serve to dilute a limited job pool. In addition, the House budget deals a heavy blow to public schools in all North Carolina counties by cutting \$53 million in funding for teachers assistants, freezing teacher salaries, and funding a \$90 million school voucher program.

Doris Williams, Executive Director of the Rural School and Community Trust stated: "Rural school districts have long known their fundamental challenge is a lack of local wealth to devote to their schools. Since rural districts sued the state in 1995, their children's right to a sound basic education has been upheld in two N.C. Supreme Court rulings. However, our state legislature has continuously failed to provide adequate and equitable funding of rural schools to secure that right. This provision doesn't get to the root of the problem and will most assuredly widen the equity gap in the NC education system."

Strong public education systems are an anchor for our cities and towns, and are the vital heart of rural communities. Rather than strengthening public schools, the House budget proposal further weakens them for the benefit of private interests. Public Schools First NC encourages the General Assembly to keep all public dollars in public schools to strengthen and improve them.

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About Public Schools First NC:

Public Schools First NC (PSFNC) is a group of citizens, parents, teachers, businesses and organizations joining together to advocate for a first-rate public education system for all North Carolinians. To learn more or to join our organization, please visit: publicschoolsfirstnc.org. Follow us on Twitter: @PS1NC.