**UEN Statement to HSB 243 Subcommittee**March 2, 2021

UEN is registered opposed to [**HSB 243**](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=hsb243) **Students First Scholarships.** Urban schools are concerned that diversion of students and resources from public schools is not the right policy for Iowa to improve outcomes for all students.

Many of our Urban Education Network school districts have great working relationships, even partnerships, with private schools in our communities. We want that to continue and do not want our opposition to this bill to be construed as a criticism for Iowa’s great private schools. We simply oppose public dollars for private purposes without the corresponding oversight, transparency, expectations and accountability that should accompany those public funds.

Iowa’s bottom 5% of schools include 34 schools designated by Iowa’s federal Every Student Succeeds Act plan, and are labeled as schools in need of comprehensive support and improvement. 17 of these schools are urban and the list will change every year. Indeed, over half of the urban school on the list have already improved enough to be no longer identified as the bottom 5%. Our urban schools on the list have a disproportionately higher number of students from low income families, students who do not yet speak, read or write in English and students with disabilities. In 2013, the bi-partisan education reform act initiated as Governor Branstad’s education reform initiative included a $10 million annual standing appropriation for high needs schools, which would likely support the staff and students in the 17 urban schools on the list, but it has yet to be funded. Iowa’s bottom 5% of schools are doing better for students than many others in the nation, but still need support, and comprehensive support to improve. Enticing students and the $10,000 or more of funds they would otherwise generate for the school away from these schools is not a good strategy to improve them.

Iowa already has school choice, through open enrollment, School Tuition Organization tax credits, 529 plans and the tuition and textbook tax credits. Any improvement expected as a result of competition has long since happened in Iowa. What hasn’t happened is comprehensive support for improving high-needs schools.

In many other voucher states, the private schools must test students that apply and report the outcomes of those students served with vouchers, so that parents, communities and states know that the program is providing the student achievement benefit promised – or that it isn’t. HSB 243 contains no such provisions of transparency or accountability.

Mostly, as Vouchers grow across Iowa with the cycle of ESSA schools ever-changing, more and more of the education funding pie will be allocated to private schools, without the accountability and transparency of locally elected school boards deciding how best to serve students. Students in our highest-needs schools would be best served with the commitment of resources to improve their education in the public schools that serve them.

UEN urges you not to move this bill forward.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

**UEN Contact:   
UEN Executive Director,** Margaret Buckton,[margaret@iowaschoolfinance.com](mailto:margaret@iowaschoolfinance.com) (515) 201-3755