

POLICY BACKGROUNDER

# South Carolina Public Education in Crisis

## Failing Schools, Voucher Fraud, and a Path Forward

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## OVERVIEW

South Carolina's public education system is in a state of chronic crisis – and the problem has been made demonstrably worse by a misguided, scandal-plagued school voucher program that drains hundreds of millions of dollars away from the children and communities who need public schools the most.

From crumbling, mold-infested school buildings in Horry and Marion counties, to poverty rates among students that dwarf the national average, to a state ranking of 41st in the nation for school quality, the evidence is clear: South Carolina's political leadership has failed its children. The voucher program, marketed as "school choice," has in practice become a vehicle for fraud, financial mismanagement, and the quiet dismantling of the public education system that 90% of South Carolina's children depend upon.

John Vincent believes, as his father demonstrated every single day – teaching in public schools during the day and working a second job at a restaurant at night to give his five children advanced higher education – that public education is the foundation of the American promise. It is not a political football to be kicked around for ideological points or the enrichment of big-box electronics retailers. It is the single most powerful tool a society has to lift families out of poverty, prepare workers for a changing economy, and give every child – regardless of their ZIP code – a shot at the future they deserve.

This backgrounder examines the history of the South Carolina voucher program, the philosophical and practical case against it, the scandals it has generated, the crisis in school facilities, the state's poor educational standing nationally, the record of incumbent Congressman Russell Fry, the vision of SC Superintendent candidate Sylvia Wright, and what John Vincent will do – from Washington, in active partnership with state leaders – to turn things around.

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## PART I: THE HISTORY OF SOUTH CAROLINA'S SCHOOL CHOICE AND VOUCHER PROGRAM

## Origins: A Long-Running Debate

The debate over private school choice in South Carolina is not new. For decades, conservative legislators and out-of-state advocacy groups funded by billionaire donors have pushed to redirect public school funding into private and religious institutions. Early efforts took the form of tuition tax credits and scholarship programs with limited scope, but the ambition was always broader: to establish the principle that public education dollars should follow individual students wherever they went, regardless of whether that destination was a public, private, religious, or home school setting.

This philosophy – that the "student should carry the money" – sounds appealing in its simplicity. Who could argue against giving families options? The problem, as we will see in detail, is that the theory breaks down when confronted with the mathematical reality of how public education is funded and operated.

Public schools carry fixed costs – buildings, buses, administrative staff, special education programs, utilities – that cannot be reduced proportionally when enrollment falls. When students (and their funding) leave, the fixed costs remain, and the school is left with less money to cover the same infrastructure.

## The 2023 Education Scholarship Trust Fund Act

The most significant recent chapter in this story began in 2023, when the South Carolina General Assembly passed the Education Scholarship Trust Fund (ESTF) Act. The law created a voucher-style program that would provide \$6,000 scholarships to qualifying K-12 students to attend schools outside their zoned public school district – including private schools, religious schools, and schools serving students with special needs. Supporters characterized it as a landmark expansion of educational freedom. Critics, including the South Carolina Education Association, public school parents, and the NAACP, immediately challenged it in court.

The South Carolina Supreme Court, in September 2024, struck down the most significant provision of the original law – the use of ESTF funds for private school tuition – ruling it unconstitutional under Article XI, Section 4 of the South Carolina Constitution, which explicitly states: "*No money shall be paid from public funds nor shall the credit of the State or any of its political subdivisions be used for the direct benefit of any religious or other private educational institution.*" The Court noted

that South Carolina voters had reaffirmed this principle more than fifty years ago by specifically amending the constitution to protect public school funding.

Despite the constitutional ruling, the legislature revised and re-enacted the voucher law in May 2025, using a creative workaround involving lottery funds in an attempt to sidestep the constitutional prohibition. The legality of this revised approach remains under scrutiny. Some lawmakers have gone even further, introducing legislation to simply repeal the constitutional provision protecting public school funding entirely – a move that would expose South Carolina's public education system to potentially unlimited diversion of funds.

## **The National Context: Vouchers and Dark Money**

The push for vouchers in South Carolina did not emerge organically from local communities. It is part of a decades-long national campaign, heavily financed by billionaire conservatives including the DeVos family and the Koch network, to privatize public education across the country.

The Southern Education Foundation, which has worked to improve public education in the South since 1867, has documented that *school vouchers in the South have historical roots that cannot be ignored: the first vouchers in Southern states were created specifically to allow white families to fund private "segregation academies" in response to court-ordered desegregation following Brown v. Board of Education*. While today's voucher proponents have different stated motivations, the structural impact – directing public money away from integrated public schools toward private, often religiously segregated institutions – echoes a troubling historical pattern.

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## **PART II: THE PHILOSOPHICAL CASE AGAINST SCHOOL CHOICE**

### **EDUCATION AS A COMMUNITY COMPACT**

Before examining the specific evidence against voucher programs, it is worth pausing to address the deeper philosophical question: why should any of us – including those without children in public schools – invest in public education at all? The answer to that question is the foundation of everything that follows.

Education is not merely a service that parents purchase for their children. It is the foundation from which everything else in a functioning society happens. It is the bedrock upon which children grow up to become productive members of their communities – people who can advocate for themselves, contribute to the economy, participate in democracy, and strengthen the social fabric that holds us all together.

That is precisely why a free and fair public education was built into the very fabric of American government from the beginning. The founders understood that foundational knowledge – the ability to read, reason, and engage as citizens – is what would make the greater American community what it needs to be for all of us to thrive.

The "school choice" movement, at its philosophical core, rests on a fundamentally different premise: that education is a private consumer good, and that taxpayers should only fund the services they personally use. This is not a community mindset. It is not a "I am part of building something greater" mindset. And if we followed that logic to its conclusion, we would have to accept some deeply troubling implications.

Consider a single woman who buys her first home and has no children in the public school system. Under the school choice philosophy, why should she pay property taxes that fund public schools? She doesn't use them. She doesn't need them. By that logic, she should be exempt. But of course, we don't think that way – because we understand, instinctively, that the education of our neighbors' children is not someone else's problem. It is our shared investment in the community we all live in. The moment we abandon that principle, we create a gray area that does an extreme disservice to our children and to the very concept of community itself.

Public education is a community compact. It is the promise that every child born in this country – regardless of their parents' income, their ZIP code, their religion, or their family circumstances – will have access to a free, quality education. That promise is not conditional on whether your neighbors agree with your values, or whether your child's needs are convenient for a private institution to accommodate. It is unconditional. And it is worth defending.

John Vincent's father understood this. He taught in public schools because he believed in that compact – believed that the children in his classroom deserved the same dedication and investment as his own five children at home. That is the tradition John Vincent carries into this campaign, and it is the tradition he will carry into Congress.

## **PART III: THE EVIDENCE AGAINST SCHOOL CHOICE VOUCHERS**

### **They Don't Improve Student Achievement**

The most fundamental justification for voucher programs is that they improve educational outcomes for students. The research says otherwise – often dramatically. Studies of long-running voucher programs in Louisiana, Indiana, Ohio, and Washington D.C. have consistently found that students who used vouchers to leave public schools performed *worse* than their peers who stayed. According to the ACLU of South Carolina, research by the National Coalition for Public Education found that in terms of learning loss in mathematics, the effect of some voucher programs has been worse than the effect of COVID-19 on student achievement.

The reasons are not hard to understand. Many schools that accept vouchers are what education researcher Josh Cowen has termed "sub-prime providers" – institutions that are propped up by voucher funding, often lack accreditation, and frequently close within a few years of opening, leaving students in educational limbo. A Brookings Institution analysis of D.C. voucher-recipient religious schools found that students received less instruction in reading and mathematics than their public school counterparts.

### **They Drain Money from the Schools That Need It Most**

South Carolina's ESTF program provides \$6,000 per student. But that \$6,000 does not come from nowhere. It is drawn from the state's education budget – money that would otherwise flow to public school districts. Public schools have significant fixed costs: buildings must be heated, lit, and maintained whether they serve 500 students or 450. Buses must run. Special education programs must be staffed. Administrative systems cannot simply scale down by 10% when 10% of students leave.

The Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Office in South Carolina estimated in 2021 that a universal school voucher program would cost the state \$2.9 billion per year. Even the current limited program drains tens of millions of dollars from the public education budget while South Carolina already underfunds its own legally mandated public school financing obligations by approximately half a billion dollars annually. The districts most devastated by this gap are the rural, high-poverty counties of the Pee Dee and Grand Strand – the heart of SC's 7th Congressional District.

## **They Mostly Benefit Families Already in Private Schools**

Voucher programs are marketed as lifelines for low-income families trapped in failing public schools. The data from states with established programs tells a very different story. In Florida, 69% of applicants to that state's expanded voucher program in 2023 were families already enrolled in private schools. In Arizona, 75% of voucher recipients had never been in public schools to begin with. The program does not lift children out of failing schools – it gives taxpayer subsidies to affluent families who were already paying private school tuition out of their own pockets. This is an enormous transfer of wealth from the public school system, which serves the poor, to private institutions, which primarily serve those who can already afford them.

## **They Endanger Students with Disabilities**

Perhaps the most morally troubling aspect of voucher programs is their effect on students with disabilities. Because private schools are not bound by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to the same degree as public schools, families who accept vouchers often must sign away their children's federally protected rights to individualized education plans and disability accommodations. A 2018 analysis in the American University Law Review found that vouchers were "effectively no real choice at all" for families of students with disabilities, setting back the educational rights of these children by decades in states where vouchers became widespread.

## **They Fund Discrimination**

The voucher bills considered in South Carolina in 2023 and 2025 explicitly prohibited discrimination only on the basis of race, color, and national origin – conspicuously omitting sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, and pregnancy. More than 80% of the private schools that accepted voucher dollars in South Carolina's 2024-2025 program year offered faith-based instruction, and multiple approved voucher schools maintained explicit policies against LGBTQ students and staff. One approved school's handbook stated that students in same-sex relationships would not be accepted. Others had policies of expelling pregnant students. These are institutions that taxpayers – including LGBTQ South Carolinians and non-Christian South Carolinians – are being asked to fund with their tax dollars.

## **They Have Been Rejected by Voters Nationwide**

In every state where voters have been given the direct opportunity to weigh in on whether public money should flow to private schools, they have said no. Most recently, in November 2024, voters in Colorado, Kentucky, and Nebraska all rejected ballot measures that would have allowed public funds to support private school education. This is not a partisan issue – across the political spectrum, Americans understand intuitively that the promise of a free, quality public education is a cornerstone of the American compact, and that promise cannot be traded away.

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## **PART IV: THE SCANDALS – A PROGRAM BUILT ON BROKEN PROMISES**

### **Big-Box Bonanza: The February 2026 Bombshell**

On February 26, 2026, The State newspaper published an explosive investigation revealing that more than half of the \$6.15 million in school voucher money spent in South Carolina during the 2024-2025 school year went to three big-box electronics and office supply retailers: Best Buy, Staples, and Office Depot. Best Buy alone received \$2,280,975 – a staggering 37% of all voucher money spent – making the consumer electronics chain by far the largest single beneficiary of South Carolina's taxpayer-funded education scholarship program.

The investigation revealed that voucher recipients had spent \$653,208 at Staples and \$205,240 at Office Depot. The three big-box stores combined received more than \$3.1 million of the \$6.15 million total expenditure. Purchases were categorized as "computers and technological devices" and "instructional materials," though the data did not identify what individual items were bought. State Representative Neal Collins expressed concern that millions in electronic devices could be resold by unscrupulous participants, and his concern was not hypothetical.

### **Fraud: A Gaston Woman and the Electronics Resale Scheme**

Earlier in February 2026, SLED arrested a woman from Gaston, South Carolina, who had allegedly misused her child's education scholarship to purchase electronics with the intent to resell them – exactly the kind of abuse that critics had long warned about. This case, while prosecuted,

illustrated the fundamental flaw in a program that distributes government-issued debit cards with minimal oversight and a broad list of approved vendors.

The arrested woman was among 82 ineligible participants identified by the state – part of a larger group of 1,005 people who were improperly enrolled in the program – who spent approximately \$64,000 in voucher funds they were never entitled to receive in the first place. These ineligible participants purchased 37 tablets, 21 laptops, 4 desktops with monitors, 7 printers, and nearly 40 sets of headphones, among other items. The state has not recovered this money.

## **The Homeschool Scandal: Rules for Thee, Not for Me**

In late 2025 and early 2026, a separate scandal erupted over the state's handling of homeschool students in the voucher program. The ESTF law explicitly prohibits participation by homeschool students. Yet the South Carolina Department of Education under Superintendent Ellen Weaver quietly allowed participation by "home-educated students" who were not formally registered under one of South Carolina's three statutory home instruction models – a technicality that critics charged was a deliberate exploitation of a legal loophole to expand the program beyond its lawful boundaries.

State senators demanded answers. In February 2026, the Republican leader of the Senate stated publicly that Superintendent Weaver had "lost the Senate's trust." Senators formally requested an investigation and an independent audit of the voucher program. The Department of Education also allowed homeschool families to make use of e-learning platforms and curriculum providers through the voucher marketplace, with funds going to courses ranging from online pirate history to paranormal history – hardly the rigorous educational programming that public school funding was intended to support.

## **Anti-LGBTQ Schools and the Constitution**

An August 2025 investigation by The State found that a third of the private schools receiving voucher funds in South Carolina maintained explicit anti-LGBTQ policies. More than 80% of voucher-recipient schools were faith-based. In many rural counties of SC-7, including Marion, Dillon, and Marlboro, the only private school within reach is a single religious institution – meaning the "choice" being offered to non-Christian or LGBTQ families is no choice at all.

## **PART V: SC'S EDUCATIONAL STANDING – AMONG THE NATION'S WORST**

### **National Rankings**

South Carolina consistently ranks among the worst states in the nation for public education. According to WalletHub's comprehensive 2026 analysis of all 50 states and the District of Columbia, measuring 32 metrics including academic performance, funding, safety, class size, and teacher credentials, South Carolina ranks 41st overall and 43rd in quality. The state sits in the bottom ten nationally, below every neighboring state except North Carolina.

On the specific metrics that matter most to children's futures, the picture is equally bleak. South Carolina's test scores for fourth and eighth grade math and reading are near the bottom quartile nationally. The state's SAT and ACT performance lags behind the national average. Teacher-to-student ratios, a key indicator of the individual attention children receive, remain poor. The state's high school graduation rate, while modestly improved in recent years, still leaves too many South Carolina children – particularly in rural areas – without a diploma.

### **The Crisis in SC-7 Specifically**

The situation in South Carolina's 7th Congressional District – encompassing Chesterfield, Darlington, Dillon, Florence, Georgetown, Horry, Marion, and Marlboro counties – is not merely poor by state standards. It is poor by any standard.

According to the South Carolina Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Office education funding dashboard, student poverty rates across the district's school districts dwarf the statewide average of 60.9%. Marion County School District reports a student poverty rate of 92.1%. Dillon County School District 4 reports a rate of 93.1%. Florence County School District 3 stands at 89.6%. Marlboro County reaches 85.6%. These are numbers that reflect the lived reality of children coming to school hungry, worried about housing, and without the stability that learning requires – children who have no private school option and whose futures depend entirely on what happens in their public school classroom.

Meanwhile, in Horry County – the largest county in SC-7 and home to the booming Myrtle Beach economy – a February 2026 facilities report revealed that 20 of the district's 58 schools are operating at over-capacity, with Carolina Forest High School projected at 120% capacity for the coming school year. Every school in the North Myrtle Beach area is above the 95% capacity threshold. Students are packed into modular classroom structures. Major renovations are underway at multiple high schools, disrupting learning during construction. This is not a school system with surplus capacity to lose when voucher funds are redirected elsewhere.

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## **PART VI: CRUMBLING BUILDINGS – BLACK MOLD AND BROKEN PROMISES**

### **Horry County: A History of Toxic Mold and Coverup**

The physical condition of schools in SC-7 represents one of the most shameful chapters in the district's recent history. In 2021, a teacher at St. James Elementary School in Horry County filed a lawsuit alleging that the district had known about toxic mold in multiple schools for years but "intentionally and maliciously covered up the water and mold issues" so that teachers and students would continue attending the unsafe buildings. Teacher Mary Burroughs, who taught in a modular classroom from 2016 to 2019, reported experiencing severe headaches, congestion, memory loss, and nerve issues – all consistent with toxic mold exposure, as confirmed by an allergy test.

Burroughs reported the smell of mildew and mold repeatedly. After the district hired a remediation company in fall 2018, she returned to find her classroom still full of dust and mold, and claimed a principal told her to "just wipe off the mold and dust with Clorox and a towel." She and numerous students became sick. A separate lawsuit filed on behalf of a St. James student in November 2020 alleged that the district had hired an unqualified remediation company, necessitating a second remediation effort.

In February 2019, parents had confronted the Horry County Schools board with a petition bearing 1,250 signatures, demanding a third-party engineering assessment of the buildings. The problems at St. James Elementary were not isolated. Testing reportedly found toxic mold levels in numerous

Horry County schools, and at least five schools were separately identified as testing positive for mold.

Today, Horry County Schools is replacing St. James Elementary entirely – a recognition that the building's problems were too deep to fix – while students continue to learn in overcrowded, aging facilities across the district.

## **Dillon County: Buildings in Need of Repair**

In 2023, Dillon School District 4 announced plans for building upgrades across schools identified as in need of repair. Dillon County, with a student poverty rate exceeding 93%, has some of the most resource-challenged schools in the state. The financial gap between what these schools receive and what they need to provide a safe, functioning educational environment is enormous. When voucher dollars are siphoned from this system, even the ability to maintain basic building safety is threatened.

## **The Rural Internet Desert: A Hidden Education Crisis**

Compounding the physical infrastructure crisis in SC-7 is a digital infrastructure crisis that is just as damaging and far less visible. Across the rural counties of the Pee Dee, tens of thousands of students go home to households with no reliable broadband internet access. In a 21st-century educational environment where homework, research, online learning platforms, and increasingly AI-assisted educational tools are standard parts of the curriculum, a child without home internet access is a child who cannot fully participate in their own education.

This is not a minor inconvenience. It is a structural barrier to learning that compounds every other disadvantage these students face. The student who cannot complete online assignments at home falls behind. The student who cannot access digital textbooks or supplementary materials is limited to what can be physically distributed in the classroom. The student who cannot participate in remote learning during weather events, health crises, or school closures loses days and weeks of instruction that their more connected peers do not. And as the economy increasingly demands digital literacy – from basic computer skills to AI fluency – the child who grows up in a broadband desert is being systematically excluded from the economic future.

**South Carolina ranks among the states with the most significant rural broadband gaps.** The FCC's own data has historically overstated broadband availability in rural areas, and the actual

connectivity picture in the rural counties of SC-7 is significantly worse than official statistics suggest. Farmers in the Pee Dee who need to access precision agriculture tools, veterans who need to access VA telehealth services, workers who need to access online job training – all are hampered by the same infrastructure failure that is holding back the district's children.

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## **PART VII: THE INCUMBENT CONGRESSMAN ON EDUCATION**

### **His Position: "School Choice" Over Public Schools**

On his campaign website, Russell Fry's education platform is brief and revealing. Under the heading "Support Parents & Students with More Choices in Education," he states: *"We have many great public schools, and teachers are heroes. However, some public schools are failing despite America spending trillions on public education. A great education should be the standard, regardless of ZIP code. Competition is necessary and that is why I firmly believe in the power of educational choice for families. Parents, not bureaucrats, should make the final decision on their children's education."*

This framing – that public schools are failing, that competition is the solution, and that "choice" is the answer – is the ideological foundation of the voucher movement. It is a position that, as the evidence in this backgrounder demonstrates, has produced fraud, constitutional violations, and the diversion of millions of dollars from the children of SC-7 to Best Buy's cash registers.

During National School Choice Week, Fry has publicly reaffirmed his commitment to "ensuring every family has access to the education that works best for them" – language that is the standard talking point of the voucher advocacy movement. He has not publicly criticized the ESTF program's scandals, the big-box spending revelations, or the homeschool eligibility abuses.

### **His Vote: The One Big Beautiful Bill Act**

On July 3, 2025, Congressman Fry voted for and enthusiastically celebrated the passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBA), signed into law by President Trump on July 4, 2025. In his

statement, Fry called it "a game-changer for hardworking Americans" and praised it for delivering "lower taxes, less red tape, and more freedom for working families."

What Fry did not mention in his statement is what the OBBB does to the children of SC-7. According to the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the bill:

- Creates a new federal private school tax credit program — a permanent, uncapped dollar-for-dollar tax credit for individuals who donate to "scholarship-granting organizations" that can fund private school tuition, effectively creating a federal voucher program through the tax code.
- Cuts Medicaid by \$911 billion over 10 years — Medicaid is the second-largest source of state spending and directly funds school-based healthcare services, special education supports, and the direct certification of students for free school meals. Cuts of this magnitude will force states to reduce K-12 education spending to compensate.
- Restructures SNAP (food stamps) in ways that will reduce the number of students directly certified for free school meals — meaning more hungry children in SC-7's classrooms, where school meal programs serve as a critical nutritional lifeline for students with poverty rates approaching 93%.
- Accelerates the phase-out of clean energy tax credits that schools were using to reduce utility costs — costs that, when they rise, come directly out of instructional budgets.

The NEA's own fact sheet on SC-7 makes clear what is at stake: the district receives \$168.3 million in total federal dollars for K-12 education, supporting 2,810 school staff positions. It receives \$42.2 million in Title I grants, \$23.6 million in special education grants, and \$76.7 million for school meals. A 12% rise in local and state taxes would be required just to replace the federal education dollars currently supporting SC-7's public schools. The OBBB threatens to reduce those federal dollars while simultaneously creating new mechanisms to divert what remains to private schools.

Russell Fry voted yes on all of it — and called it a win.

## **What Fry Has NOT Done for SC-7 Education**

A review of Fry's legislative record reveals that his primary sponsored legislation has focused on crime and law enforcement (56% of his bills), with no significant education-focused legislation introduced or enacted. His four enacted bills include the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act, a post office naming bill, and a grant transparency act — none related to education. He has not

introduced legislation to address the mold crisis in Horry County schools, the broadband desert in the Pee Dee, the teacher shortage in rural SC-7 districts, or the overcrowding crisis in Horry County.

Notably, Fry voted Nay on the AI for Main Street Act in January 2026 – a bipartisan bill that passed 395-14 – suggesting a pattern of opposing broadly supported, forward-looking legislation.

The \$10.8 million in district funding Fry announced in January 2026 was directed entirely toward law enforcement communications, water infrastructure, and public safety – with zero dollars allocated to education, school building repair, broadband expansion, or teacher support.

Russell Fry introduced the TRUSTED Broadband Networks Act (H.R. 5358) in September 2025 that aims to assist small and rural broadband providers in securing their networks. It streamlines the removal and replacement of insecure foreign telecommunications equipment to safeguard U.S. communications infrastructure from foreign adversaries.

Critics of the bill cite its limited impact without funding and its focus on national security versus addressing the larger rural broadband issue. According to tracking data from GovTrack.us, the bill currently has roughly a 3% chance of being enacted due to lack of support by colleagues.

## **The Contrast**

The contrast between Russell Fry's record and John Vincent's vision could not be more stark. Fry has voted to create federal private school vouchers, cut the Medicaid funding that supports special education in SC-7 schools, reduce the food assistance that feeds hungry students, and celebrated a bill that education experts say will devastate public school funding – all while introducing no meaningful education legislation of his own. John Vincent will fight every day to protect and strengthen the public schools that 90% of SC-7's children depend upon.

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# **PART VIII: SYLVIA WRIGHT'S CAMPAIGN – A VISION FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION**

## **Who Is Sylvia Wright?**

Sylvia Wright is a North Charleston native, a former teacher with twenty years of classroom experience, and a product of the South Carolina public education system – the same system she is running to transform. She graduated from Fort Dorchester High School, earned degrees from Columbia College and the Citadel, and is currently pursuing her doctorate at the University of South Carolina. She announced her candidacy for South Carolina Superintendent of Education on September 10, 2025, and if elected in November 2026 would be the first African American woman to hold that office.

Wright is running against incumbent Superintendent Ellen Weaver, whose tenure has been marked by the scandals described above and the erosion of trust with the state Senate, and Lisa Ellis. Wright's campaign has earned endorsements from State Senator Deon Tedder and the Chairman of the Charleston County Democratic Party.

Crucially, Wright has taught in suburban, rural, and urban schools across South Carolina – giving her a first-hand understanding of the profound inequity between well-funded and under-resourced districts that is the central crisis of SC public education. "I've been in schools where they've had everything they needed," Wright has said, "but then I've been in schools where they don't have programs, where the school floods and they have to move to another side of the building where there are roaches, where the bathroom's so dirty. The inequity is the biggest issue I see in education right now."

## **Wright's Five-Priority Platform**

Wright's campaign platform is organized around five pillars: students, teachers, schools, districts, and the state – reflecting a comprehensive, systems-level understanding of what it will take to transform South Carolina's public education outcomes.

**For Students** – The Whole Child Approach: Wright recognizes that children cannot learn when their foundational needs are unmet. Hungry children, traumatized children, children without stable housing cannot be expected to perform academically at the same level as children whose basic needs are secure. She calls for prioritizing social-emotional learning to address the root causes of behavioral issues; dramatically increasing the number of social workers, school counselors, and school psychologists available to students across the state; and collaborating with community organizations, government agencies, and nonprofits to address the systemic barriers that stand between children and opportunity – including housing insecurity, food insecurity, healthcare gaps, transportation barriers, and childcare access.

**For Teachers** – Recruitment and Retention: South Carolina faces a severe teacher shortage, driven in no small part by low pay, poor working conditions, a lack of adequate support, and a professional culture that has failed to respect and value educators. Wright proposes enhanced tax credits and childcare vouchers for educators, improved discipline policies that protect teachers both in school and online, reduced excessive standardized testing requirements, a uniform minimum compensation rate for professional development, and the evolution of teacher preparation to a paid residency/internship model – modeled on successful programs already pioneered by Clemson University and USC.

**For Schools** – World Class Education for Global Competition: Wright's vision for schools is forward-looking and technology-embracing, while grounded in the reality that graduation is not an end point but a foundation for lifelong learning. She calls for providing genuine individualized success pathways for every K-12 student; empowering students to take ownership of their learning rather than being passive recipients of standardized instruction; responsibly leveraging AI technology and blended learning models; expanding Career Technical Education and apprenticeship opportunities in every district; and creating platforms for students to showcase their talents and skills beyond traditional testing.

**For Districts** – Local Control and Collaboration: Wright is sharply critical of the incumbent superintendent's approach, which she characterizes as politically focused and centralization-oriented in ways that have fractured communication and trust between the state department, districts, schools, and communities. She proposes rebuilding collaborative relationships through regional conferences and peer-learning opportunities; sharing and modeling best practices between districts; expanding the Communities in Schools program; and implementing community-commission-based turnaround planning for struggling schools.

**For the State** – Transparency and Accountability: In a statement that directly addresses the voucher scandal, Wright's platform makes a powerful declarative statement: "*Public funds belong in public schools.*" She calls for rigorous monitoring of strategic plans with accountability to taxpayers; evidence-based research frameworks for data collection and reporting; and ensuring that taxpayer money is allocated effectively for the betterment of all public school students – not diverted to electronics retailers or unaccountable private institutions.

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## PART IX: JOHN VINCENT'S VISION

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## **EDUCATION FOR A TECHNOLOGY-DRIVEN ECONOMY**

John Vincent's approach to education goes beyond simply defending public schools from the voucher threat. He recognizes that South Carolina's educational system must be fundamentally transformed to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving, technology-driven economy.

The rise of artificial intelligence is not a distant prospect – it is already reshaping every sector of the economy, from manufacturing to healthcare to finance to agriculture. Every job sector represented in SC-7 – tourism, hospitality, farming, construction, small business – will be affected by these changes within the next decade.

South Carolina's children cannot compete in this economy if they are being educated in buildings with black mold, in overcrowded classrooms with 30-plus students per teacher, following a curriculum designed for an industrial economy that no longer exists. The fundamental shift that must happen is from a one-size-fits-all, standardized-testing-driven model of education toward a genuinely individualized learning model – one that meets each student where they are, builds on their unique strengths, and prepares them not just for the jobs that exist today but for careers and opportunities that cannot yet be fully defined.

This is precisely aligned with the vision expressed by Sylvia Wright: using AI technology and blended learning responsibly, expanding Career Technical Education, creating individualized success pathways, and empowering students to take ownership of their education. The convergence of a forward-thinking congressional candidate and a forward-thinking state superintendent candidate represents a genuine opportunity for South Carolina.

## **Veterans and the Adult Re-Education Imperative**

John Vincent's personal commitment to veterans runs deep – as a Command Master Chief who served twenty years in the Navy, he has seen first-hand what happens when men and women who dedicated their best years to their country return home to a civilian economy that does not value their skills, does not recognize their experience, and does not provide the educational pathways they need to build new careers.

For veterans transitioning from military service, and for the thousands of workers in SC-7 who are being displaced by automation, outsourcing, and the structural transformation of the economy, the

question is not what education they should have received as children – it is what education and skills training they can access right now.

South Carolina's adult re-education infrastructure is woefully inadequate to this challenge. Community colleges are underfunded. Workforce development programs are fragmented and often disconnected from the actual needs of employers. Veterans in particular face bureaucratic barriers to accessing the GI Bill benefits they have earned.

John Vincent envisions a robust, 21st-century adult re-education and continuing education system that is as responsive and individualized as the K-12 system must become – one that acknowledges that learning does not end at 18, that career transitions happen multiple times in a modern working life, and that the veteran who spends many years in service to his country has skills and discipline that, properly translated and supplemented with current technical training, can power a career in cybersecurity, advanced manufacturing, renewable energy, or healthcare that will sustain his family and strengthen the region's economy.

John Vincent also acknowledges the challenges of our Gen Zs. Many trained and did everything they were advised to do to move into a productive career, only to find out upon graduation their degrees are less valuable due to the impact of AI technology. They need both the ability to upgrade skills and financial relief from school loans for degrees they were advised to pursue.

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## **PART X: WHAT JOHN VINCENT WILL DO AS A CONGRESSMAN**

While education policy in the United States is primarily a state and local responsibility, a determined, informed, and strategically effective member of Congress has significant tools available to fight for better public education – and John Vincent will use every one of them. Critically, John Vincent will not operate in isolation from South Carolina's state-level education leadership. He will establish and maintain a regular, ongoing working relationship with the South Carolina Superintendent of Education – and he strongly supports Sylvia Wright's campaign for that office – to ensure that his federal legislative priorities are directly aligned with what SC's public schools actually need on the ground. A congressman who talks to teachers,

superintendents, and the state's top education official regularly is a congressman who can fight effectively for the right things in Washington.

## **Protect and Strengthen Federal Education Funding for SC-7**

The federal government provides funding for public schools primarily through Title I (supporting schools with high concentrations of poverty), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and Title IV (supporting technology, well-rounded education, and safe schools). The school districts of SC-7 – with poverty rates among students ranging from 62% to 93% – are heavily dependent on Title I funding. SC-7 currently receives \$42.2 million in Title I grants and \$23.6 million in special education grants annually. John Vincent will fight to protect and increase these allocations, and will oppose any attempt to convert them into block grants that states can redirect to private school vouchers.

At a time when forces in Washington are seeking to cut or eliminate the Department of Education entirely, John Vincent will be a vocal and knowledgeable voice for maintaining robust, targeted federal support for high-poverty public schools. He will work in close coordination with Sylvia Wright and SC's district superintendents to ensure that federal funding priorities reflect the real needs of SC-7's schools – not the ideological preferences of voucher advocates.

## **Defend IDEA and Special Education Rights**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is the federal law that guarantees students with disabilities the right to a free, appropriate public education. As noted above, voucher programs systematically undermine these rights. John Vincent will preserve and strengthen IDEA funding and enforcement, including pushing back on attempts to defund or weaken the federal oversight mechanisms that protect children with disabilities. He will work with Sylvia Wright's office to identify specific gaps in special education services across SC-7 and target federal resources accordingly.

## **Secure Rural School Infrastructure Funding**

The deteriorating physical condition of school buildings in SC-7 is not just an educational crisis – it is a public health crisis. John Vincent will pursue federal funding through programs like the Rural School Infrastructure Act, the USDA's Community Facilities programs, and available infrastructure appropriations to help high-poverty rural school districts in SC-7 repair, upgrade, and replace aging

school buildings. Eliminating black mold, replacing failing HVAC systems, and addressing overcrowding are prerequisites for learning, not luxuries. He will work directly with Horry County Schools, Dillon County, Marion County, and other SC-7 districts to identify the most critical facility needs and advocate for targeted federal investment.

## Close the Rural Broadband Gap

**John Vincent will make rural broadband expansion a top priority for SC-7.** The digital divide that separates connected students from unconnected ones is an education crisis, an economic crisis, and a quality-of-life crisis all at once. He will fight to ensure that the billions of dollars allocated through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act's broadband provisions reach the rural communities of the Pee Dee that need them most – and he will hold internet service providers accountable for delivering on their commitments to underserved areas.

John Vincent will also push for the **E-Rate program** – which provides discounted internet access to schools and libraries – to be fully funded and expanded, ensuring that every school in SC-7 has the connectivity it needs to support modern digital learning. He will work with Sylvia Wright's office to map the specific broadband gaps affecting SC-7 schools and develop a targeted federal-state strategy to close them. A student in Marion County deserves the same access to online learning tools as a student in Myrtle Beach. That is not a luxury – it is a basic requirement of educational equity in the 21st century.

## Workforce Development and Adult Re-Education

Congress has significant authority and funding mechanisms in the area of workforce development, primarily through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). John Vincent will work to strengthen and fund WIOA programs in SC-7, with particular attention to aligning workforce training with the technology skills that employers in the region need – including AI literacy, advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and cybersecurity. He will push for regional workforce development hubs at the community colleges serving SC-7 – Horry-Georgetown Technical College, Florence-Darlington Technical College, Williamsburg Technical College, and others – that can provide rapid, certificate-based skills training to displaced workers, veterans, and career-changers at minimal or no cost. He will coordinate with Sylvia Wright's office to ensure that state-level workforce education initiatives are complemented and amplified by federal resources.

## **Strengthen Veteran Education Benefits and Transition Support**

John Vincent will fight to streamline and improve the GI Bill implementation process, pushing the VA to reduce the bureaucratic delays that prevent veterans from accessing their education benefits quickly after transition. He will advocate for expanding the GI Bill's coverage to include shorter-term credential programs and technology certifications that align with the actual demands of the modern economy – including AI-related skills, cybersecurity certifications, and healthcare credentials. He will work to ensure that South Carolina's technical colleges and community colleges are fully GI Bill-approved and equipped to serve the veteran student population of SC-7.

## **Oppose Federal Privatization of Education**

John Vincent will be an unwavering voice in Congress against any federal effort to expand school voucher programs at the national level. The OBBB's new federal private school tax credit program is precisely the kind of mechanism that will drain resources from public schools while providing no accountability for outcomes. John Vincent will work to repeal or defund this provision, and will oppose any further federal voucher expansion – armed with the evidence from South Carolina's own experience: the fraud, the big-box windfalls, the constitutional violations, the diversion of funds from the children who need them most.

## **Champion Technology and AI in Education**

As Congress grapples with the implications of artificial intelligence for virtually every sector of American life, John Vincent will ensure that education is central to that conversation. He will support and co-sponsor legislation to build AI literacy at every level of the educational system, and will push for federal investment in the technology infrastructure – high-speed internet, updated devices, teacher training – that South Carolina's rural school districts need to participate in the 21st-century learning economy. He will work with Sylvia Wright's office to develop a coordinated federal-state strategy for responsible AI integration in SC classrooms – one that empowers teachers and students rather than replacing them.

## **Regular Communication and Partnership with SC Education Leadership**

John Vincent will not be a congressman who shows up in Columbia for photo opportunities and then disappears to Washington. He will establish a formal, regular communication channel with the South Carolina Superintendent of Education – meeting quarterly at minimum, and more

frequently as needed – to ensure that his federal legislative priorities are directly informed by what is happening in SC-7's classrooms. He will convene regular roundtables with district superintendents, principals, teachers, and parents from across SC-7 to hear directly about the challenges they face and the resources they need. He will be the congressman who knows the names of the schools with mold problems, who understands the specific broadband gaps in each county, and who can walk into a Congressional hearing and speak with authority about what public education in rural South Carolina actually looks like.

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## **PART XI: A UNIFIED VISION – WHAT MUST BE DONE**

South Carolina's public education crisis is deep, systemic, and decades in the making. It will not be solved by a single election or a single piece of legislation. But it can be addressed – with political will, evidence-based policy, and leaders at every level who are willing to put the interests of children and families above the interests of ideologues and special interests.

The path forward requires action on multiple fronts simultaneously. At the state level, it requires a new direction from the Superintendent's office – the kind of principled, student-centered, transparency-focused leadership that Sylvia Wright is campaigning to provide. It requires the legislature to stop diverting public school funds into a voucher program that has been marked by fraud, constitutional violations, and demonstrably poor outcomes. It requires investment in the repair and replacement of crumbling school buildings. It requires a genuine commitment to recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers, particularly in the rural and high-poverty communities of SC-7. And it requires honestly confronting the reality that South Carolina has not given its children the education they deserve, and that the status quo is not acceptable.

At the federal level, it requires a congressman from SC-7 who understands education from the inside – whose father was a public school teacher, whose career was built on developing human potential, and who has a genuine, personal commitment to ensuring that every family in every county of SC-7 can access a high-quality public education. John Vincent is that congressman.

The central principle is simple, and it is the same principle that is etched into South Carolina's own constitution: public funds belong in public schools. The money South Carolina's taxpayers invest in education is an investment in the children of South Carolina – not in Best Buy's quarterly earnings, not in religious institutions that discriminate against LGBTQ students, not in the private

school tuitions of families who were already paying those bills. It belongs in classrooms, in the hands of trained teachers, in buildings that are safe and functional, in communities connected by broadband internet, and in programs that prepare every child – rich or poor, urban or rural, neurotypical or differently abled – for the world they are about to inherit.

That world is changing faster than any generation in human history. South Carolina's children deserve an education system that is changing with it. John Vincent will fight for that education system – in Washington, and in active, ongoing partnership with advocates like Sylvia Wright who are fighting for it in Columbia.

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