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Don't be fooled. Tax credits for private school are about dismantling public education.

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I was in college before I found out there were people in the world who did not think Franklin D. Roosevelt was a great president.

Sheltered, maybe. But yes, it was a revelation that some opposed the New Deal as a way to pull the United States out of the Great Depression. It's a pretty basic and consistent political divide in the this country: Is government a good thing that builds roads, protects us, educates us and provides basic social safety nets, or is it a malevolent entity, most of which should be dismantled and handed over to the private sector?

That's what brings us around to [scholarship tax credits](#), a modification of school vouchers that's made its way through various conservative byways to land in Kentucky with the help of Sen. Ralph Alvarado, R-Winchester. Alvarado and other advocates say [Senate Bill 110](#) will help low-income students who are being failed by the public schools.

That sounds a like a reasonable argument until you realize that scholarship tax credits are one of the many ideas started by free market conservatives to dismantle public schools and hand their services over to the private sector. Don't take my word for it. It's [right here](#) on on the web site of the Cato Institute, a free market think tank, first fully funded by right-wing political behemoth Charles Koch.

“In 1955 Nobel laureate economist Milton Friedman published ‘The Role of Government in Education,’ in which he made a theoretical case for separating government funding of education from government provision. Rather than operate schools, Friedman argued that the government should grant vouchers directly to parents that they could redeem at the school of their choice.”

Similar to legislation last year, the bill allows corporations and individuals to donate money to scholarship granting organizations. such as School Choice Scholarships in Louisville. The donors get a tax break and the group gives private school scholarships to student applicants, who come from households at 200 percent of the federal free and reduced lunch qualification. In Kentucky, that could mean a family of four that makes \$95,000 a year. Alvarado's bill would set aside a \$25 million pool for those tax credits. That limit would increase by 25% if at least 90% of the credits are doled out, according to the bill. Last year, the fiscal note on the bill said the bill could expand to cost the general fund more than \$200 million.

At the micro level, this is a bad idea because Kentucky can't afford it. In part due to an exorbitant range of tax breaks that give away about \$13 billion a year, more than we take in, state school funding is about \$1 billion behind where it should be; the gap between rich and poor schools has slipped to where it was before 1990's Kentucky Education Reform Act, and Gov. Andy Beshear has promised a \$2,000 raise to teachers with uncertain funding. Tax credits sound vague, but it means actual money that is not paid in taxes to the general fund. And as Anna Baumann of the Kentucky Center on Economic Progress pointed out, the credit is 19 times bigger than the state's charitable deduction for other kinds of giving. Donors could also contribute stock and avoid capital gains taxes to game the system further.

At the macro level, this is an attack on public education, which is foundational to our democracy, and by the way, is actually guaranteed in the Kentucky Constitution. There has always been a basic compact that everyone's taxes support public school for everyone because they educate the children that private schools reject. (Not to mention many private schools in the South were only started to avoid desegregation.) If people really think more students should go to private schools, then they should help private schools raise more funds for scholarships, not try to game their state taxes. In Kentucky, the bill is being pushed heavily by a widespread network of Catholic schools, which could afford many, many more scholarships if they didn't have to pay out so much money in clergy sex abuse scandals.

Of course, public schools, like private ones, could do a better job with some of its students, but the answer is not to further starve schools for funding, or siphon off a stream of students to private schools with little accountability or oversight. Public education is a public good that should be supported by the public, not diverted and destroyed by our elected public servants. Although he was himself educated privately, FDR said in 1936, noted his administration's support of public education throughout the Great Depression "has given to this country a population more literate, more cultured, in the best sense of the word, more aware of the complexities of modern civilized life than ever before in our history."

Public education is still the linchpin to prosperity for most of Kentucky's population, but many legislators seem determined to starve it. Sending a few hundred kids to private school won't make this state great. Supporting our public schools, from kindergarten to college, can.