

School Vouchers in Texas

April 8, 2024



Top Line

1. The Texas Governor and some GOP legislators have pushed for an extensive voucher program for Texas.
2. The voucher bill is supported by wealthy right-wing individuals and the organizations they fund.
3. There are many good reasons to oppose the voucher bill:
 - i. It will take money from public schools, which are already underfunded.
 - ii. Supporters claim it will improve student achievement, but the data on that is mixed at best. Voucher programs in other states have often decreased student progress.
 - iii. Voucher programs primarily benefit wealthier families, who often are already sending their children to private schools.
 - iv. The voucher programs don't fully cover the cost of many private schools.
 - v. Experience in other states has often been negative.
 - vi. Voucher programs like the one envisioned for Texas often result in the creation of low-quality schools out to make a buck.
 - vii. Voucher programs are detrimental to rural areas, which generally do not have many non-public options.
 - viii. Private schools are not required to serve all students. This can be detrimental to students with special needs.
 - ix. The private schools have very limited transparency and accountability.
4. Adequately funding public schools is a far better strategy for Texas, our students, and our communities.

Texas should reject voucher programs, and instead focus on adequately funding our public schools.

Backup

1. The Texas Governor and some Republican legislators have pushed for an extensive voucher program for Texas.

- a. On Oct. 13, 2023, the Texas Senate passed Senate Bill 1, which greenlights the creation of an Education Savings Account (ESA) program in Texas.
 - i. Eligible parents could get \$8,000 to use for private school tuition and education costs.
 - ii. The money does not go directly into parents' pockets, but rather is distributed by the state comptroller's office. (1)
- b. Governor Abbott called four special sessions in 2023 hoping to pass the bill to allow taxpayer money to fund a student's private school education. He was thwarted by Democrats, and by rural Republicans opposed to the idea. (2)

2. The voucher bill is supported by wealthy right-wing individuals and the organizations they fund.

- a. According to OpenSecrets.com, the American Federation for Children, a leading school choice advocacy group, intends to spend \$10 million on state elections in 2024. Its first targets: 15 Texas Republicans who opposed a school voucher program championed by Gov. Greg Abbott. (3)
- b. Jeff Yass, a GOP megadonor who lives in Pennsylvania, gave Abbott \$250,000 in October and another \$6 million in December 2023, according to state campaign finance data. "With this substantial financial backing, Governor Abbott will ensure that the conservative candidates who support his bold agenda to expand school choice, secure our southern border, and lower property taxes have what they need to keep Texas red," Abbott campaign manager Kim Snyder said in a statement. (2)
- c. Governor Abbott has used these funds to support challengers to the GOP House members who opposed his voucher program.
- d. The Economic Policy Institute opposes vouchers, and states: "There is substantial and growing evidence that voucher programs do not serve students and may deepen educational and economic inequality. Voucher programs and the broader education privatization movement of which they are a part are also deeply unpopular. Instead, education privatization is a project by deep-pocketed right-wing funders and think tanks committed to dismantling our public institutions and

collective power and implementing a policy regime of social control in service of the wealthy and corporations." (4)

3. There are many good reasons to oppose the voucher bill:

- i. It will take money from public schools, which are already underfunded.**
 - a. The Texas Tribune reports, "...according to the bill's financial analysis, school districts are set to receive less money as students sign up for education savings accounts and leave public schools. School districts in Texas receive funding based on student attendance." (5)
 - b. The National Education Association states that "Voucher programs' skyrocketing costs will divert funding not only from public schools, but also other critical public services." (6)
 - c. The Houston Federation of Teachers, in opposing the voucher program, says "They will take money away from our neighborhood public schools," (7)
 - d. The Texas Legislative Black Caucus, a bipartisan group of 20 African Americans in the Texas Capitol, opposes the voucher program. State Representative Ron Reynolds explains "We're overwhelmingly against vouchers because they hurt our public schools." (8)
 - e. Analysis of the Florida voucher program, which is one of the largest in the US, indicates that "this school year about \$1.5 billion will be diverted from Florida public schools to private schools as students leave." (5)

- ii. Supporters claim it will improve student achievement, but the data on that is mixed at best. Voucher programs in other states have often decreased student progress.**
 - a. There are many studies of the impact of voucher programs on student achievement, some of which show positive effects and others showing the opposite. Supporters and opponents of vouchers can easily pick and choose studies to support their cause.
 - b. However, Brookings, a respected research organization, has reviewed available studies and concluded "The last decade of achievement studies have shown negative voucher impacts, with more mixed or inconclusive results on attainment." (9)

- c. Brookings also found that “Data from traditional voucher programs has indicated that the larger the program, the worse the results tend to be.” (9) Texas, one of the most populous states, would have a very large program.
- d. The Texas Tribune looked at independent research and spoke to experts who have studied voucher programs for decades. They found that for the most part, studies suggest that test scores go down for students in such programs, especially in math. (5)

While some studies have shown improvements from vouchers, others have shown that vouchers hurt student achievement. At a minimum, it is clear that any potential benefit to educational quality is highly uncertain.

iii. Voucher programs primarily benefit wealthier families, who often are already sending their children to private schools.

- a. The National Education Association points out “Overwhelmingly, school vouchers are being used by families with children already in private school to subsidize their tuition.” (6)
- b. In Iowa in January 2023, Governor Kim Reynolds signed a universal private school voucher program into law. Recent data revealed that two-thirds of Iowa students who received funds in the 2023-2024 school year were already attending private school. (6)
- c. In Arizona, as in Texas, the program was promoted as a way for low-income families who might feel confined within the public education system and want to explore other educational options for their children. But after the program expanded, the Arizona education department found that 75% of those in the program were not previously enrolled in public school, meaning they were already home-schooling, enrolled at a private school or had never entered the school system. (5)

iv. The voucher programs don't fully cover the cost of many private schools.

- a. The Intercultural Development Research Association pointed out that school vouchers do not cover the full cost of tuition or related travel fees, and private schools are not equally available to all students. “The majority of Texas students are Latino, are black, and are other students of color and are from households that earn a lower income,” Latham Sikes said. “There's no

point in carving out an expensive and highly selective program with no guardrails for students' success." (10)

v. Experience with vouchers in other states has often been negative.

- a. When the Arizona voucher program was being debated, educators and community organizations urged opposition to the program. They warned that far from serving lower income families, vouchers would serve private school families, siphon valuable funds from public schools, and disrupt and destabilize the state budget. All of that, and more, has happened across the state. (6)
- b. Arizona Governor Katie Hobbs told Arizona lawmakers, the program “lacks accountability and will likely bankrupt the state.... **It does not save taxpayers money, and it does not provide a better education** for Arizona students.” (6)
- c. The National Education Association provides additional background on the Arizona program, which is one of the largest in the country: “While it may still be growing, Arizona’s ESA voucher program is also a fiasco. All the promises made over the past year by the law’s most zealous supporters have run aground amid reports detailing the program’s astronomical cost and lax accountability”. (6)
- d. Iowa adopted a voucher program in 2023, and analysis by the National Education Association found that two-thirds of Iowa students who received funds in the 2023-2024 school year were already attending private school. (6)
- e. Brookings reports that voucher programs have had negative impacts on academic achievement in some states. In Louisiana, for example, two separate research teams found negative academic impacts as high as -0.4 standard deviations—extremely large by education policy standards—with declines that persisted for years. (1)

vi. Voucher programs like the one envisioned for Texas often result in the creation of low-quality schools out to make a buck.

- a. In Florida, Of the roughly 2,300 private schools accepting vouchers, 69 percent are unaccredited, 58 percent are religious and nearly one-third are for-profit, according to the state education department. (11)
- b. Brookings reports: “Studies indicate that after traditional voucher expansions, **the private school market floods with new pop-up providers.**”

- That’s exactly what is happening with the ESA-style expansions in Arizona now. Many new schools are nearly or entirely funded by the ESA payments...Many of these schools will quickly close.
- There’s also existing academic evidence predicting that traditional voucher programs incentivize existing private schools to raise tuition, using the new dollars as something of a public subsidy.
- And that is exactly what recent reports are showing with ESA passage, with existing private schools raising their tuition. (9)

vii. Voucher programs are detrimental to rural areas, which generally do not have many non-public options.

- a. Many rural areas do not have private schools. A map provided by the Texas Private Schools Association shows that many towns outside of large urban areas do not have any private schools. (12)
- b. 15 incumbent GOP members of the Texas State House opposed Abbott's voucher push. One of them is Gary VanDeaver, HD 1, because, as he and many education leaders in his district see it, vouchers pose a serious threat to the long-term financial health of his district’s school systems without providing a meaningful benefit to his constituents. (13)

viii. Private schools are not required to serve all students. This can be detrimental to students with special needs.

- a. The Texas Tribune reports that proposed voucher bills in both the Senate and House to funnel taxpayer dollars to families to pay for private school tuition could put accessibility at risk for the more than 700,000 students enrolled in Texas’ public special education programs. (14)
- b. The federal laws that give disabled students a right to education don’t apply in private schools. (14)
- c. Of the few private schools in Texas that accept children with special needs, "many of them would still be too expensive for most Texans even with the voucher system in place, as their tuitions range as high as \$40,000 per year." This far exceeds the \$8,000 provided by the voucher program. (14)

ix. The private schools have very limited transparency and accountability.

- a. Critics across the country point out that private schools receiving state funds through existing voucher programs aren't required to show that students are succeeding academically, like public schools are. (5)
- b. The Economic Policy Institute points out that "Unlike public schools, private school voucher programs lack accountability and oversight." (4)
- c. The National Education Association observes "Voucher laws generally do not require any sort of disclosure from private schools about their finances, how they operate, or how they measure student achievement." (6)

4. Adequately funding public schools is a far better strategy for Texas, our students, and our communities.

More Information

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