

## FACT SHEET:

# PRIVATIZING PUBLIC SCHOOL FUNDS: THREATS TO EQUITY, ACCESS, AND EDUCATIONAL QUALITY



Across the country, states have expanded their voucher programs rapidly within the past few years. School choice advocates named 2023 the “year of universal choice” because of the frequency of states adopting these programs. Universal school choice programs make school vouchers available to all families, regardless of their income level or whether their child already attends private school.

Voucher programs may use terminology like “education savings accounts,” “opportunity scholarships,” or “tax credit scholarships.” While policymakers use a range of terms to describe voucher programs, they all function similarly: by diverting public school funding to private schools. Since the term “voucher” can be associated with negative perceptions by constituents, using alternative terminology has become a common strategy to pass unpopular policies.

While “school choice” sounds good in theory, the privatization of public school funds exacerbates educational inequity and increases the disparities it claims to mend. Data continues to reaffirm that school vouchers are riddled with fraud, show unimpressive results, defund public education, and amount to a handout to the wealthy. Supporters argue that vouchers expand equity and opportunity, but in fact, vouchers divert public money to the private, often religious, education of a handful of students. These funds instead should support the public schools that serve 90% of our nation’s students.

Voucher programs present several major issues.

## Undermine Academic Achievement

Studies have found zero statistical significance to the claim that voucher programs improve academic success.<sup>1</sup> In fact, a recent article by Michigan State University education professor Joshua Cowen said “the last decade of research on traditional vouchers strongly suggests they actually lower academic achievement.” Cowen cites Louisiana as an example, where two separate research teams found that vouchers produced standard deviations in academic achievement of as much as -0.4. To put this number in perspective, the impact of COVID-19 on academic trajectories was -2.5, meaning the impact of vouchers was significantly worse than the impact of the pandemic on academic achievement.<sup>2</sup>

## Create Fraud and Wasteful Spending

In states such as Arizona and Florida, the expansion of vouchers has gutted accountability and encouraged deep levels of tax fraud. In Arizona, taxpayer-funded school vouchers have been used for ski passes, golf equipment, and lessons on how to drive a luxury car that cost more than \$800 per session.<sup>3</sup> In Florida, taxpayer dollars set aside for school vouchers have paid for kayaks and Disney tickets.<sup>4</sup> Accountability has been virtually non-existent in these programs, allowing fraudulent use of vouchers at the expense of public school funding.

## Drain State Budgets

While privatization proponents frame universal vouchers as a cost-effective method, vouchers have consistently cost significantly more than projected and drained state budgets. For example, according to data from the National Coalition for Public Education, Arizona’s voucher program is estimated to cost 1,346% more than projected. Florida’s voucher program came in 519% above projected costs in its first year.<sup>5</sup> Voucher programs consistently cost significantly more than expected and create budget shortfalls.

## Enable Discrimination

Even when using public money, private schools remain free to discriminate against or reject students for reasons such as their sexual orientation.<sup>6</sup> Private schools are also not required to accept students with disabilities, and these students do not have the same rights as they do in public schools. For example, private schools are not required to offer Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or to honor IEPs that a student carries over from a public school.<sup>7</sup> Some states require parents to sign a formal waiver of a student’s rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to use a private school voucher.<sup>8</sup>

# FACT SHEET: PRIVATIZING PUBLIC SCHOOL FUNDS: THREATS TO EQUITY, ACCESS, AND EDUCATIONAL QUALITY



## Have Historically Excluded Marginalized Communities

After the Supreme Court's decision to desegregate public schools in *Brown v. Board of Education*, states used vouchers to maintain segregated public education. Throughout the 1950s, southern states implemented voucher policies that shut down public schools. For example, Prince Edward County, Va., shut down public schools and funded white-only private schools with tuition grants.<sup>9</sup>

## Provide Handouts to the Wealthy

Researchers continue to find that vouchers amount to little more than a handout to the wealthy. Vouchers often do not cover the entire cost of private tuition, making them less useful to low-income families. Private schools also have additional costs, such as transportation, uniforms, and extracurricular activities. A new analysis of Arizona's voucher program by the investigative outlet ProPublica finds that the richer the student's zip code, the more likely they are to use a private school voucher. Additionally, the poorest zip codes have the smallest portions of students using vouchers.<sup>10</sup>

## Recommendations

Evidence overwhelmingly supports the claim that private school vouchers are a failed policy. Instead of focusing on private school vouchers that benefit only small numbers of students, lawmakers must consider solutions that advance opportunity for the 90% of U.S. students who attend public schools. Policies that lawmakers at the federal, state and local level should champion include:

- Support for equitable, full funding for public education. Full funding would ensure that schools with high concentrations of students from low-income families can afford to provide a high-quality educational experience for all students.
- Ensure that students with disabilities have the supports they need, and that public investment is sufficient to provide the "free appropriate public education" to which they are legally entitled.
- Implement higher teacher pay, such as a national minimum annual teaching wage of \$60,000 .
- Direct resources for advanced coursework to students of color, who continue to be underrepresented in advanced studies.
- Provide free breakfast and lunch for all students.
- Increase access to free after-school and summer programs.
- Address the youth mental health crisis by increasing the number of counselors in schools.

## ENDNOTES

1. National Education Association, "Vouchers," NEA, December 2, 2021, <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/action-center/our-issues/vouchers>.
2. Joshua Cowen, "Research on School Vouchers Suggests Concerns Ahead for Education Savings Accounts," Brookings, August 15, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/research-on-school-vouchers-suggests-concerns-ahead-for-education-savings-accounts/>.
3. Laurie Roberts, "Ski Passes? Ninja Lessons? Where Is the Accountability in Arizona's School Voucher Program?," The Arizona Republic, October 11, 2023, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/op-ed/laurieroberts/2023/10/11/arizona-school-vouchers-are-paying-for-ski-passes-and-ninja-lessons/71143452007/>.
4. Nick Papantonis, "Florida Allows Taxpayer-Funded 'school Choice' Vouchers to Pay for Kayaks, Disney Tickets," WFTV, September 1, 2023, <https://www.wftv.com/news/local/florida-allows-taxpayer-funded-school-choice-vouchers-pay-kayaks-disney-tickets/GLAC7OS7JVFDHIKJAE3E35TZ6A/>.
5. "Private School Voucher Costs Are out of Control," National Coalition for Public Education (NCPE), accessed October 28, 2024, <https://www.ncpecoalition.org/voucher-costs>.
6. "Issue Brief on Private School Programs," GLSEN, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://www.glsen.org/activity/issue-brief-private-school-programs#10>.
7. Amanda Morin, "The Difference between IEPs and Service Plans," Understood, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://www.understood.org/en/articles/the-difference-between-ieps-and-service-plans>.
8. Questions Every Parent of a Child with a Disability Should Ask Before Taking a Voucher," National Coalition for Public Education (NCPE), accessed October 28, 2024, <https://www.ncpecoalition.org/parents-students-with-disabilities#:~:text=3,entry%20for%20students%20with%20disabilities>.
9. Raymond Pierce, "The Racist History of 'School Choice,'" Forbes, May 7, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/raymondperce/2021/05/06/the-racist-history-of-school-choice/>.
10. Eli Hager and Lucas Waldron, "In a State With School Vouchers For All, Low-Income Families Aren't Choosing to Use Them," ProPublica, October 12, 2024, <https://www.propublica.org/article/arizona-school-vouchers-esa-private-schools>.