

PEER

Partnership for Equity
& Education Rights

PUBLIC DOLLARS FOR PRIVATE SCHOOLS

The State of Vouchers in 2025

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Foreword

Public education is the heartbeat of our democracy, a space where every student can access the tools and resources to dream, grow, and thrive regardless of background, identity, or geography. Our public schools bridge societal divides, fostering communities rooted in shared values of advancing equity and opportunity. These institutions are not just places of learning; they are centers of hope and progress, offering every student a fair chance to contribute to the strength and future of our nation.

However, this promise is under threat. Voucher programs, often cloaked in the language of “choice” and “opportunity,” divert public funds to private institutions, leaving many students behind. Far from fulfilling their promises of accountability, equity, and improved outcomes, these programs exacerbate inequality, fund discrimination, and undermine the foundational principle that education is a public good—a shared investment in the future of our communities and our country. As students, we witness firsthand how these programs favor the privileged few, while eroding public schools’ ability to serve all students inclusively and effectively.

This report illuminates the harmful realities of voucher programs, including the waste, fraud, lack of oversight, and inequities they perpetuate. It serves as a call to action and a reminder of what is at stake. At [SEAT](#), we are committed to centering the voices of students and communities in the shared fight to protect and strengthen public education. Together, we can ensure that public schools remain a cornerstone of democracy and a pathway to a brighter, more equitable future for all.



Students Engaged in Advancing Texas ([SEAT](#))

Vouchers' Threat to Public Education

Public schools are intended to be a universally accessible public good, providing every child an opportunity to learn, become engaged citizens, and contribute to communities, the economy and the country. Although access to public education is a cornerstone of American democracy, there has been a growing push, led by [ultra-wealthy individuals across the country](#), to privatize education through voucher programs. Vouchers divert public taxpayer dollars away from public schools to pay for private school tuition, homeschooling, and other educational expenses.

Proponents of vouchers have adopted a narrative of “family choice” and “educational freedom.” In reality, private schools, by nature of being private institutions, are allowed to selectively choose their students. In turn, private school vouchers largely cover tuition costs for students who [already choose private school options](#) or are from families with higher incomes. Voucher programs ultimately impact students remaining in public schools, as declines in enrollment defund schools and leave public school students with fewer resources and limited options. The diversion of dollars away from public school budgets has a significant impact on the public school experience, from the loss of resources like textbooks and extracurriculars, to broader effects like [teacher and staff layoffs](#), [slashed K-12 budgets](#), and [school closures](#).

In this report, we examine the states that have implemented voucher programs to understand how vouchers are rapidly altering the U.S. education system.



The School Privatization Blueprint

Currently, [28 states](#) and the District of Columbia have established at least one of the three common types of voucher programs: school vouchers, education savings accounts, and tax credit scholarships.

Decoding the Many Names of Voucher Programs



School Vouchers

Public tax dollars in the form of a voucher are given to families to pay for tuition costs at a private school.



Education Savings Accounts (ESAs)

Public tax dollars in the form of a personal debit account for families to withdraw money from to pay for educational expenses including, but not limited to, private school tuition and homeschooling expenses.



Tax-Credit Scholarships

A state-issued tax credit given to people who make a contribution to a grant-making organization that funds tuition scholarships for students to attend private school.

No matter their form, each of these types of voucher programs is part of a broader effort to privatize education. Continued reporting [outlines the role](#) of school privatization in the broader conservative Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 blueprint. In 2025, efforts continue to expand both into additional states and through federal legislation like the [Educational Choice for Children Act](#), following the same privatization roadmap.

Public Opposition to Vouchers

Although more than half of U.S. states have a voucher program in some form, the programs remain unpopular among voters. In the 2024 election, voters in three states [rejected ballot initiatives](#) that would have expanded private school vouchers. In Colorado, voters rejected [Amendment 80](#), and in the red states of Nebraska and Kentucky, voters repealed an [existing voucher law](#) and rejected [Amendment Two](#), respectively.

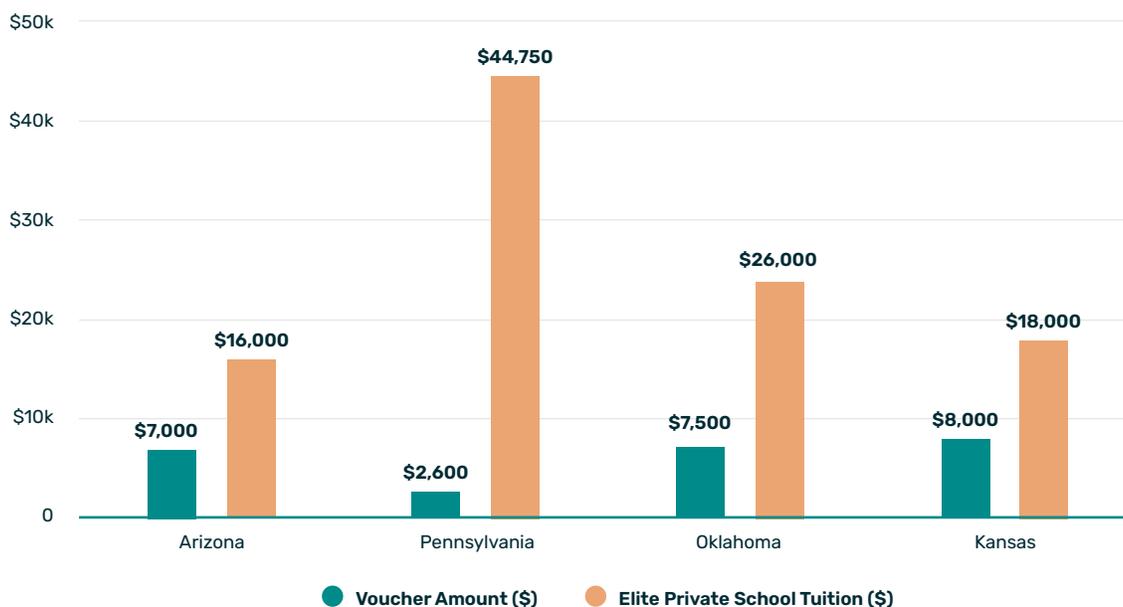
Beyond the ballot box, public opinion polling frequently shows support for public schools over vouchers. According to a poll [conducted by All4Ed](#) in the days leading up to the 2024 election, 68% of voters want to “increase funding to improve public schools” over “increase funding to give parents vouchers”, including 58% of Republicans and 82% of Democrats. While the push for voucher programs is likely to continue both federally and in individual states, Americans of all backgrounds have expressed their opposition to the privatization of school systems.

Understanding the Impact of Vouchers

The impact of voucher programs is not exclusive to families with school-aged children. Public tax dollars fund these programs making it important for Americans to understand who has access to public funds, how spending is being reported, and the overall impact on their state and local budgets.

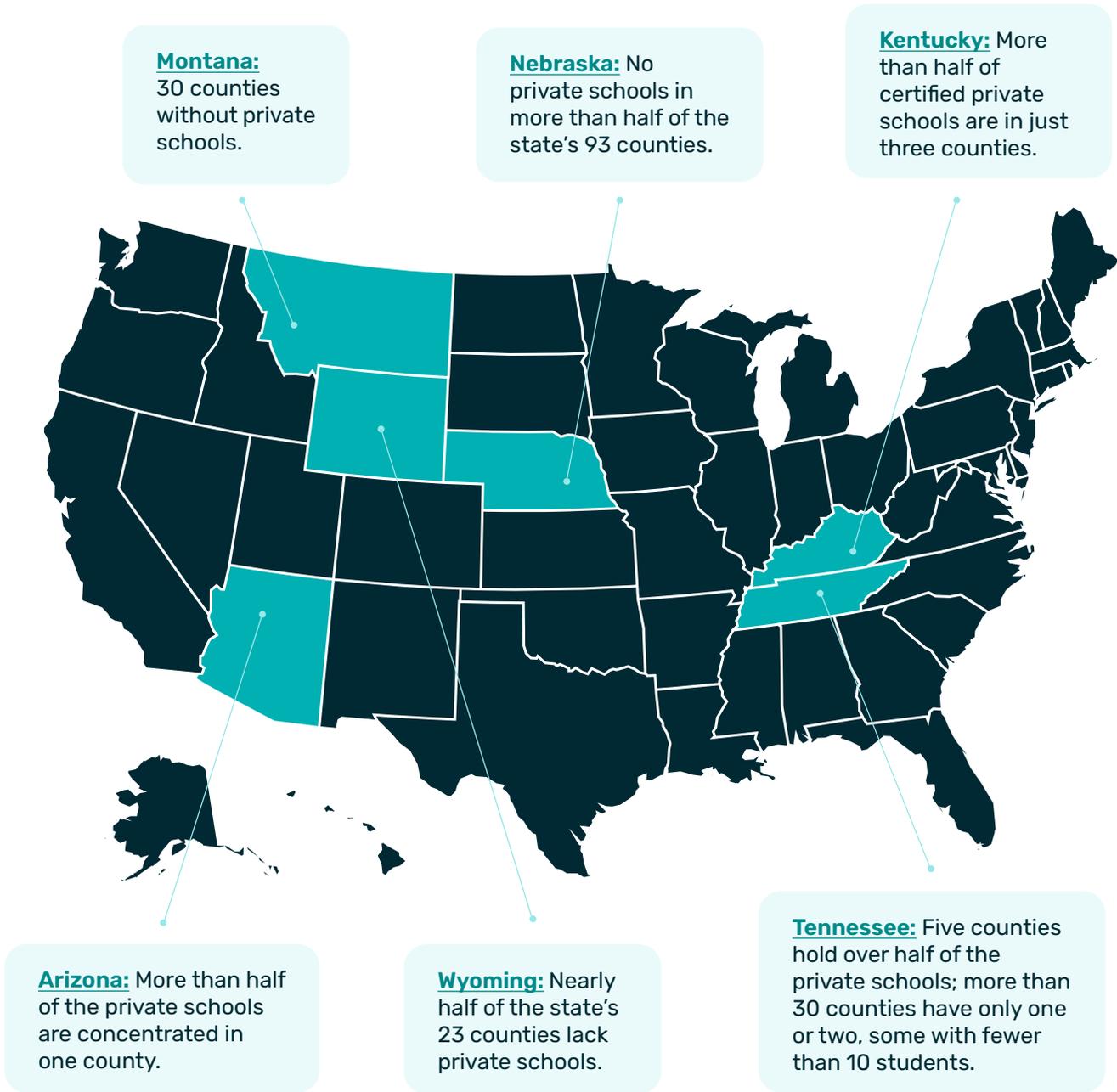
Harms of Voucher Accessibility

Vouchers are often marketed as an opportunity for students from low-income communities to receive a private education. In reality, the cost of top-rated private schools far exceeds the amount of money a voucher provides, leaving families to cover the difference between private school tuition and voucher dollars.



This gap creates a barrier for families with lower incomes to utilize the voucher for accredited, quality schools charging higher tuition. Private schools also typically do not provide the same [transportation](#), food, and wraparound services that public schools do. Even in states with universal eligibility for vouchers, only families who can afford thousands of additional dollars for tuition receive the greatest benefit.

Private school access also varies widely across the country. Only 34% of rural families have at least one private school within five miles, compared with 92% of urban families. In effect, [rural communities' tax dollars are subsidizing private school students in urban schools](#).



While the consequences are especially pronounced for rural schools, when voucher programs use billions of dollars in a state's general fund, schools across all geographies see their budgets affected. The eventual impact of this diversion is that [public schools will lose funding and be forced to close](#), hurting the communities relying on them.

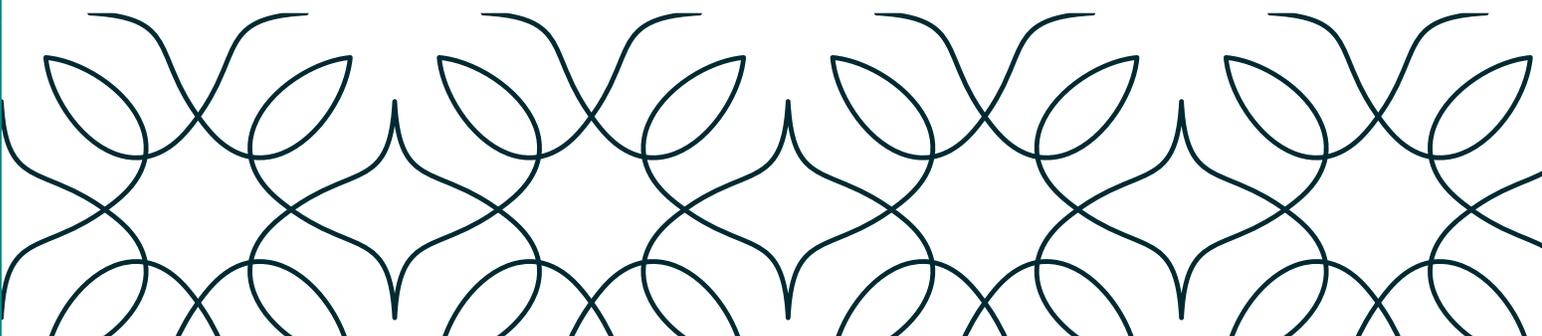


Growing up in a first-generation household, my family always said my education was my ticket to a better life. My lifeline is my education, and 'school choice' is an illusion my small-town friends and I will never know. The nearest private school is 45 minutes away, and even if it wasn't, it's simply not something my family could afford. I know that my public school is the center of my community. It's where I've grown, built lifelong relationships, and found opportunities I never would have had otherwise. Public schools are my lifeline. Stand for small-town kids and stand with public schools."

- Public high school student; Sanger ISD in Texas

Lack of Accountability

Unlike public schools, private schools receiving voucher funds are often not accountable to any meaningful oversight or regulation. In many states, public schools receive a performance grade based on student academic growth and achievement and school report cards are made available for families and taxpayers to review. Additionally, any member of the public can attend school board meetings and review school budgets. Meanwhile, there are private schools that get public money [without public accountability](#).





Arkansas

In Arkansas, Attorney General Tim Griffin has issued an opinion [exempting private schools receiving public funds from Freedom of Information Act Requests](#).



Ohio

Ohio spent nearly \$1 billion on its near-universal private school voucher program in 2024. At the same time, [legislators stripped private school accountability legislation](#) of key provisions including requiring private schools to publicly report to the state how taxpayer funds are spent and requiring private school students to take the same standardized tests that public school students take.



Arizona

In Arizona, a state that does not vet or oversee voucher schools, a charter school was closed for mismanagement, only to reopen as a religious school accepting state-funded vouchers. [The school then closed suddenly because of financial issues](#).



Wisconsin

In Wisconsin, accountability efforts have been met with partisan opposition, and bills calling for transparency in spending by listing voucher deductions on property tax bills have been introduced repeatedly without being granted a public hearing. Some districts, like [Racine](#) and [Milwaukee](#), have taken this task on locally by providing inserts with local property tax bills.

Voucher lobbyists and supporters have actively opposed accountability measures. Arkansas lawmakers voted against [HB1144](#), which would have required private schools participating in state voucher programs to adhere to the same reporting requirements as public schools. Supporters of the bill argued that standardized reporting helps inform families of how schools are performing so that they can make the best decisions for their students. Opponents believe that private schools should be left alone to “do what they do so well” and argue that public and private schools are not held to the same standards.

When lawmakers establish voucher programs without accountability requirements, parents and caregivers are unable to make informed decisions about where their child attends school. Private schools and [microschools](#) participating in voucher programs are often not accredited, and in many places are operated outside of formal education settings, such as strip malls and living rooms. Many universities and employers require attendance at an accredited high school, making this essential for future education and employment.

Ballooning State Budgets

As voucher programs expand across states, it is clear that initial government predictions for the costs of voucher programs have been underestimated.

In Arizona, the [first year of universal vouchers was projected to cost \\$33 million](#) but actual costs reached nearly [\\$550 million](#); the second year was projected to cost \$65 million but actual costs topped \$700 million – more than 1,000% over budget. The voucher program ultimately contributed to a \$1.4 billion budget deficit after the expansion of universal eligibility that allows all students to qualify.

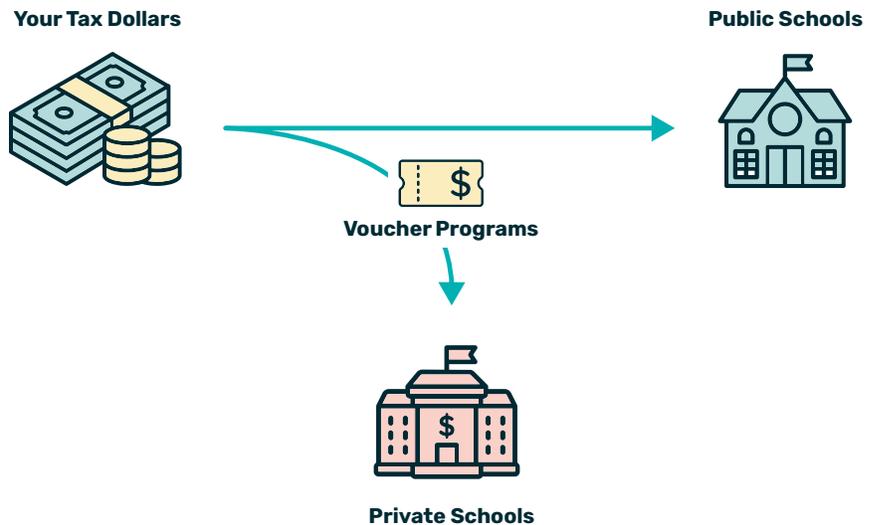
[In Iowa](#), the state estimated the first year of their private school voucher program would cost \$106.9 million. The true cost was \$128 million. The second year cost was also underestimated, predicted to be \$132.3 million and instead coming in at 35% over budget at \$179.2 million.

Likewise, spending on third-party vendors to administer voucher programs has been extensive. In Oklahoma, the state estimated \$1 million in administrative costs for a vendor in the first year of a new tax credit program, with just over \$700,000 projected in the second year. In reality, [the cost was nearly \\$4 million](#). In West Virginia, [a company contracted to process purchases and payments was paid nearly \\$10 million](#) and was, at one point, only able to process one-third of submitted orders.

As private dollars are diverted toward vouchers, local school districts have made challenging budgetary decisions, including [shutting down schools](#), [laying off hundreds of teachers](#), [decreasing bus routes](#), and firing counselors and [social workers](#). When a public school sees a reduction in its student population, that school's budget is cut, and that, in turn, reduces funding for teacher salaries and classroom resources. Without faculty and materials, public school students are impacted the most. In Florida, lower public school funding has led to limitations on [students' class schedules](#), reducing access to credit recovery options, international baccalaureate (IB) programs, and more. Dramatic cuts to school budgets and [school closures](#) push more families to leave district options, creating an ongoing cycle that leads to further privatization.



Voucher Programs are the vehicle pulling public tax dollars into private/homeschools.



Fraud, Waste, and Abuse

Without spending or reporting guidelines, voucher programs across states have been rife with instances of fraud, waste, and abuse. This year in Arizona, indictments were issued around \$110,000 in voucher funding for 43 “ghost” children that don’t exist and to parents who lived in another state. In North Carolina, data produced by the North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority shows [43 instances](#) where several schools had [more voucher recipients than the total enrollment of the school](#). Voucher scholarships from West Virginia were spent in [12 other states](#). In one year, [families in Florida spent \\$1.2 million of ESA voucher funds](#) on televisions, \$43,374 on treadmills, \$30,436 on indoor trampolines, and \$226,584 on game consoles. For Floridians, tickets to theme parks are also considered an educational expense. Utah’s voucher program, [unless repealed by HB192](#), allows families to buy single and multi-day ski passes.

POLITICO

Florida’s top education official says public school closures a tradeoff for school choice

May 29th, 2024

ARKANSAS TIMES

“I’ve had it up to here with the private school crap that’s being put out,” he said. “You can sit there and smirk and say things about public schools and degrade them, but I’m telling you – there are many other public and societal issues that public schools are being asked to deal with that private schools do not scratch the surface of.”

- Rep. Jim Wooten

May 29th, 2024

In many states, vouchers also go to those who were already attending private school:

- In the 2023-24 school year, kindergartners were the [majority of students](#) enrolled in West Virginia’s “scholarship” program, meaning these students never attended public school.
- In [Florida](#), 69% of new voucher recipients were already enrolled in private school. Only 13% left their public schools to enter the program.
- In [Arkansas](#), 64% of students who received funds through the state’s Education Freedom Account (EFA) for the 2023-24 school year were already enrolled in private schools. Only 5% of Arkansas recipients in 2023-24 transferred from public schools.
- In [Wisconsin](#), roughly 80% of students participating in the rapidly-expanding statewide voucher program never attended a public school. In 2024-2025 only 5% of Wisconsin Parental Choice Program students attended a public school in the prior year.



In practice, voucher programs send dollars to many families who do not need financial assistance to send their child to a private school.

Enabling Discrimination

Public schools are required to meet the needs of all students who live within their geographic boundaries; they cannot legally turn away students based on gender, sexual identity, race, faith, or disability. Private schools can, however, refuse to admit children because of their disability, gender, sexual orientation, test scores, religion, and more. This discrimination is often included in student handbooks either explicitly, such as in North Carolina religious schools, or more indirectly in statements of faith or vague language.

When students participate in voucher programs, families are often required to waive their rights otherwise protected under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and their right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). This leaves schools with no obligation to serve a student’s special education needs or be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

[In Wisconsin, state law requires parents be notified of their waived rights](#) when their child enters a voucher school, where [discrimination is rampant](#) despite opposition to vouchers and advocacy efforts by disability rights organizations statewide. Funding discrimination for students with disabilities is a major issue in Wisconsin, with students receiving a “Special Needs Voucher” that entitles them to a 90% reimbursement for special education costs on top of their initial voucher payment. Meanwhile, Wisconsin’s public schools are still required to provide busing and Individualized Education Plans for all students with disabilities, in both public and private schools, regardless of voucher status.

A [survey of private or religious schools](#) receiving money through Pennsylvania’s Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit (OSTC) voucher program found that 100% of the schools reviewed have policies that could be used to discriminate against students, nearly 20% have explicit statements discriminating against LGBTQ+ students, and more than 50% discriminate against students based on disability. In a review of one-third of Wisconsin’s private schools, 4-in-10 have policies that indicate disparate treatment for LGBTQ+ students, including expulsion of students who are gay or transgender.

Discriminatory admissions policies from religious schools in Pennsylvania

The Dayspring Christian Academy (DCA) in Mountville, PA states in its admissions application:

“Thus, DCA retains the right to refuse enrollment to or to expel any student who engages in sexual immorality, including any student who professes to be homosexual/bisexual/transgender or is a practicing homosexual/bisexual/transgender, as well as any student who condones, supports, or otherwise promotes such practices (Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:27).”



From Mt. Moriah Christian School in Smithfield, PA admissions policies:

“Mt. Moriah may deny admission to students with physical or mental handicaps because the school is not physically able to accommodate disabled students and because it does not have staff or resources to serve students with exceptional learning problems. ...Mt. Moriah Christian School reserves the right to accept a student on a trial basis. We may re-evaluate his/her progress at any time deemed necessary by the administrator, staff, or Board of Directors to determine if it is still in the best interest of the school and the students to continue his/her attendance. Mt. Moriah Christian School reserves the right to dismiss any student at any time as we may deem necessary.”

In 2023, Texas only had 67 private schools—5.6% of the state’s total private schools—designed to serve students with special needs. Many of these schools have made selectivity of their student body a common practice, for example, by stating that they prefer children with [“above average to average intelligence.”](#)





Public school offers something private special education schools do not: Inclusion. Public schools have real campuses with gymnasiums, sports fields, and some degree of extracurricular programs. They provide structured social opportunities. In a public school, my son can interact with the general student population multiple times a day—most significantly at lunch in the cafeteria.

In contrast, private special education schools are isolating. Many don't have cafeterias. Most don't offer extracurriculars, and the one that did refused to let my son participate because he wasn't independent enough. The small student population meant even fewer chances for socialization.

Academically, public schools hold my child to higher standards. They actually teach him. In private school, expectations were so low that he was frequently sent home or made to sit up front with the receptionist instead of being in class.

Voucher programs are tools for segregation. They don't create new opportunities for kids like mine; they remove existing ones by draining public school funds."

- Pamela Lang, Arizona parent

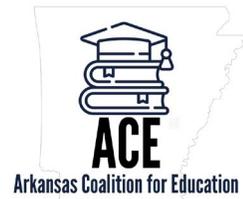
A Critical Crossroads

Despite ongoing attacks on public education on a national level, the [overwhelming majority of parents](#) are satisfied with their children's education, indicating that those with proximity to public schools support those in their own community.

Even as vouchers expand, public schools continue to provide 90% of American students with an accessible education complete with comprehensive services and legal protections for families and communities. While important conversations around funding, student performance, and more are necessary, the national focus on vouchers draws attention away from improvement of the public school system and toward privatization of the system as a whole.

At the start of 2025, [at least 12 states](#) were exploring legislation that will either introduce or expand voucher programs, [federal legislation](#) to expand private school vouchers has been introduced, and [an Executive Order](#) was issued directing the Department of Education to direct federal funds to voucher programs. These expansion efforts defy public will, as seen at the ballot box, and will continue to divert resources from America’s public schools.

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