

Do school vouchers help kids in struggling schools?

No. Vouchers, often misleadingly called “scholarships,” divert tax dollars meant for public education to private schools that are not accountable to the public and generally do not serve the interests of struggling, low-income students.

This is why

Vouchers are a “coupon program” for private education. Families who already send their children to private schools are often those who apply for and get the vouchers.

Vouchers don’t expand education opportunities for low-income students. The amount of money contributed by the voucher is hardly ever enough to pay for full private school tuition. Private schools are not obligated to take vouchers. Often those that do are under-enrolled and struggling.

Vouchers promote discrimination. Despite receiving tax dollars, private voucher schools are often free to turn away students who are gay or transgender and students who don’t subscribe to a religious doctrine. They can discriminate based on test scores and perceived ability.

Vouchers violate the separation of church and state. Once money leaves the public system, there’s no public accountability for what the school teaches to students, including religious doctrines such as biblically inspired explanations for the origin of the universe and life and views of American history that distort the truth about slavery.

Vouchers don’t improve opportunities for struggling students. Private schools cherry-pick who they want to educate by limiting services for students with learning disabilities and enforcing strict academic or discipline entry requirements.

Vouchers don’t improve education. The programs often have negative effects on the academic achievement of students.

Look at the facts

More than half of students receiving vouchers in Indiana have **never attended Indiana public schools**. Only 3% of voucher recipients are leaving the state’s worst schools.

In Arizona, the state’s tax credit programs that pay for vouchers designate **only about 3% of voucher money to special-needs students**, and barely a third goes to children of low-income families.

In Nevada, most applicants for vouchers were **not from low-income areas** in the state. They came from neighborhoods that already had access to the **highest-performing public schools**.

A **national analysis of voucher programs** found most programs do not cover enough of the tuition to enable poor minority children to access the best private schools.

A review of the effects of a statewide voucher program in Charlotte, North Carolina found a significant number of voucher-receiving schools **prohibit lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender students** from enrolling.

During the first year of a voucher program in North Carolina, the state spent \$12 million for students to transfer to private schools. About \$11 million went to **faith-based schools**.

A study of the nation’s oldest voucher program in Milwaukee found that private schools that receive the vouchers can **select the best students** and “counsel out” or expel students that present the most difficulties.



In Indiana, school vouchers **lowered academic achievement**. An average student with a math score at the 50th percentile declined to the 44th percentile after one year of enrollment in private school.

Students who used a voucher program in Louisiana to attend a private school experienced **lower math, reading, science and social studies scores**. Their likelihood of a failing score increased by 24 to 50 percent.

A research study of the Washington, DC voucher program found it had a statistically significant **negative impact on math achievement** for students using the vouchers and statistically insignificant negative impact on their reading test scores. Students who received the vouchers, and their parents, experienced no significant increase in their level of satisfaction with their school experiences.

Four studies, using different research designs, of

academic outcomes of voucher programs in three states – Louisiana, Indiana, and Ohio – and the District of Columbia found **negative results in math and reading achievement** and no evidence the programs will eventually increase high school graduation and college-going.

More than 86% of Wisconsin students who received vouchers through that state’s program in the 2016-17 school year were **already attending a private school** prior to receiving a voucher.

Black families are less likely than all other groups to use vouchers or keep their children in private schools. An ethnic breakdown of students enrolled in the Indiana voucher program found that as participation in the program ballooned from 3,911 students in 2011 to 36,290 students in 2019, the percent of **Black students using the vouchers dramatically declined** from 24.1% to 12% while the proportion of white students increased.

WHAT PRIVATIZERS BELIEVE	WHAT WE BELIEVE
School vouchers increase education opportunities for students.	School vouchers create opportunities for private, unaccountable schools to obtain tax dollars.
School vouchers provide students a pathway out of poverty.	School vouchers provide those families who already have the means to attend private schools a government subsidy.
School vouchers are a civil rights cause.	School vouchers lead to more discrimination and inequity in education.
School vouchers are a solution for families in need of better schools.	School vouchers lower the quality of education for all students and diminish the capacity of the entire education system.

Bottom Line

Voucher programs, in all their many forms, are not a solution for struggling students and families who want better education opportunities. The overall negative effects of vouchers on public school communities, especially the least well-served communities, negate any positive effects vouchers may have on an isolated family or small population of students. What’s needed instead are policies that address inequities in our public education system and provide more education opportunities for all students. Vouchers are a gift of taxpayer funds to private and religious schools that if expanded will cost American taxpayers billions of dollars.