

**Private School Vouchers Undermine Texas Students’ Ability to Access Equitable Educational Opportunities**

**TLEEC Testimony on Educational Opportunities in Texas, submitted by Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., to the Texas House Committee on Public Education, August 12, 2024**

Dear Chairman Buckley and Members of the Committee:

The Texas Legislative Education Equity Coalition (TLEEC) is a statewide collaborative of more than 38 organizations and individuals with the mission to improve the quality of public education for all children, with a focus on racial equity. We advocate at the local, state, and national levels for high-quality teaching, curriculum and instructional practices, and bilingual education for emergent bilingual students, as well as fair funding and enhanced college access and success.

Our testimony today addresses our deep concerns regarding any potential school voucher legislation, including any attempts to establish an education savings account (ESA) program or tax credit scholarship in Texas.

TLEEC strongly opposes legislation that takes public money away from public schools. Families in states that have already passed school voucher legislation – such as Arizona, Ohio, and Florida – have been left with fewer choices, poorly-funded public schools, and a diminished public education system dedicated to serving all students, including those with the greatest needs.

Rather than “increasing education opportunities… to ensure that students and families have increased options to attend a high-quality school, regardless of circumstance” as today’s interim charge outlines, private school vouchers are a proven way to exacerbate existing educational inequities for the most vulnerable students and families.

**Private School Vouchers Drain State Budgets**

School voucher programs divert much-needed funds from public schools. Though calculating the total cost of voucher programs can be challenging, a recent analysis asserts that vouchers are costing states “billions in taxpayer dollars” (Meckler & Boorstein, 2024). Beyond hard numbers, analysts have found three things to be true about the cost of vouchers:

1. Vouchers are expensive;
2. The cost of voucher programs increases over time; and
3. The true cost of programs frequently surpasses the initial estimate (PFPS, 2023).

This strains state budgets for education and other public services funded by general revenue.

In 2022, Arizona became the first state to enact a universal voucher program. Although the program has only been in effect for two years, it has already destabilized the state budget, with Gov. Katie Hobbs telling lawmakers that 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” (Walker, 2024). The original legislation estimated the program would cost the state $33.4 million in FY 2023, $64.5 million in FY 2024, and $125.4 million in FY 2025 (Moran, 2022). However, this has not been the case. For the 2022–23 school year alone, the cost of the voucher program totaled at least $587.5 million – **more than 17 times the initial estimate** (Griffith & Burns, 2024; Meckler & Boorstein, 2024). The cost projection for the upcoming school year is $950 million, of which $320 million is currently unbudgeted (Walker, 2024).

To fill the budget gaps school vouchers are creating, Arizona will have to make cuts to other essential services and critical state programs, including $333 million for water infrastructure projects; tens of millions of dollars for highway expansions and repairs; improvements to the air conditioning in state prisons, where temperatures can soar above 100 degrees; and a $54 million cut from Arizona community college budgets (Hager, 2024).

Stories of states far surpassing initial budget projections when it comes to vouchers are common, and some schools are losing more than just student enrollment funding. For example, in Ohio – where 140,000 families applied for school vouchers last year and the cost has exceeded projected estimates, reaching nearly $1 billion – “the very public schools that are losing students must pay to transport any students who attend private institutions within a half-hour drive of the public school” (MacGillis, 2024).

In Florida, voucher programs cost the state $241.2 million in 2008; by 2019, that number had increased to $996.3 million (Abrams & Koutsavlis, 2023). This recent data about the fiscal impact of voucher systems show they are duplicative education systems that strain state budgets for public education and public services.

Furthermore, the fact that, in many states, the overwhelming majority of voucher recipients are students who were already enrolled in private schools is concerning. For example, in Arkansas, 95% of voucher recipients never attended public school before receiving a voucher (Arkansas Department of Education, 2023). After Florida expanded its voucher program in 2023, only 13% of new participants had previously attended a public school, and 44% of new participants came from families that earned more than $120,000 for a household of four or did not submit income (Prieur, 2023). And in Arizona, researchers found that voucher use “is significantly higher in affluent districts, even as they also boast a high percentage of top-rated public schools” (Jennings, 2024).

In an analysis of states with the most extensive voucher programs, increasing state spending on vouchers often meant decreasing state per-pupil public school funding, ranging from a -1.5% drop in funding in Indiana to a 12% drop in per-pupil funding in Florida (Texas AFT, 2024). Given these statistics from other states, it is likely that vouchers will represent a large and growing new cost to Texas’ state budget, rather than saving the state money, as some pro-voucher advocates have suggested.

Additionally, the most recent proposed voucher in Texas was $10,500 – significantly larger than the basic allotment, which stands at $6,160. Therefore, even students transferring from public schools to private schools with a voucher will cost the state more than they would have if they had remained in public schools, further straining the state’s budget.

**Educational Choice Should Not Compromise Students’ Rights**

The overwhelming majority – nearly 90% – of Texas’ 6.2 million students attend publicly-funded schools (NCES, 2024; Texas House, 2023). For these students and their families, there is already a variety of options that allow for school choice within the public school system, such as early college high schools, specialized schools, and both intra- and inter-district transfer options. These programs offer additional options to students and families while still affording them the protections guaranteed in the public education system.

Conversely, children are much more vulnerable to discrimination in private schools because private schools are not required to serve all students equitably nor to operate under existing state and federal legal protections. Students with disabilities, in special education, bilingual education, or of diverse religious and gender identities could all be denied admission and educational services in a private school setting (Abrams & Koutsavlis, 2023).

Private school voucher programs, including ESAs, do not offer parents choice; instead, it is the schools’ choice. Public money should not be used to fund discrimination against students.

**Recommendations**

Research has shown that school funding is the most important factor when it comes to providing children with a high-quality education (Latham Sikes, 2022). Any program that would divert funding – directly or indirectly – away from public schools would undermine Texas students’ abilities to access high-quality educational opportunities.

We urge the legislature to strengthen our public schools by:

* increasing the basic allotment to account for inflation since 2019, and adjust for inflation going forward;
* increasing targeted funding for students in bilingual education and special education;
* investing in evidence-based in-school programs, including early college high schools and high-impact intervention programs;
* and keeping public money in public schools.

Our children are counting on us to give them the education they deserve. Keep public money in public schools. Thank you for your consideration.

*For questions, please contact TLEEC either through Dr. Chloe Latham Sikes at IDRA (chloe.sikes@idra.org), or Jaime Puente at Every Texan (puente@everytexan.org).*

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**Resources**

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