



Parents Are Disempowered by Private School Voucher Programs

IDRA Testimony against SB 176, submitted by Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., to the Texas Senate Education Committee, March 22, 2023

Dear Chair Creighton and Honorable Members of the Committee:

My name is Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., and I am the deputy director of policy at IDRA, an independent, non-partisan non-profit committed to achieving equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

IDRA opposes SB 176, and any other legislative proposals that divert public school funds for private use, particularly without any public transparency or accountability. SB 176 takes the state farther away from the goals of fair school funding and parent and community accountability over education quality.

SB 176 Uses Public Money for Private Purposes with No Fiscal Accountability

Texas public schools serve all students as part of the state's constitutional obligation to provide an efficient public education system. SB 176 creates a separate, inefficient system of publicly-funded educational assistance organizations.

The education savings account (ESA) program would funnel about \$10,000 per participant to certified educational assistance organizations (CEAO). However, the bill lacks any financial reporting or academic accountability requirements. Texas public schools are rated according to both fiscal accountability (FIRST) and academic accountability (A-F accountability system). While these accountability systems do not always account for all the indicators to measure student achievement and school performance, they do offer the public a way to gather open, transparent information about campus and district performance.

Research shows that ESA and similar voucher programs in other states have led to fiscal mismanagement, waste and fraud (Abrams & Koutsavlis, 2023). Just five years after Arizona began their private school voucher program, the state found fiscal mismanagement among program participants (Davenport, 2016). In addition, while some comparable programs contain a cap or limit, they often balloon to consume a large portion of state education funding and decrease the public education funding for students in the public school system.

SB 176 Disempowers Parents with No Data, No Reports on Their Students' Educational Opportunities

SB 176, like similar proposals, contains a special education notice (Sec. 29.368) to alert parents

applying for the ESA program that they waive their students' federal and state protections under federal disability laws. In private school voucher programs, students with disabilities can be denied services according to their needs and can experience higher rates of disciplinary and behavioral referrals. However, data on these incidents is scarce precisely due to the lack of reporting, leaving parents in the dark and students excluded from what are protected educational environments in public schools (NCD, 2018).

In addition, 2020 study found that private school voucher programs across 29 states rarely require transparent reporting on student achievement or graduation rates or information as basic as teachers' education qualifications. Most of the programs allowed private schools to discriminate against students' religious and gender identities for admission. Only five states of the 29 required that students with disabilities be admitted to private schools benefitting from the voucher programs.

Overall, the programs obscured transparency on school and student performance, reduced accountability for meeting students' needs, and permitted discrimination from students' accessing the private education touted by the programs. Private school vouchers disempower students and parents from accessing high-quality education.

IDRA is available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. Thank you for your consideration. For more information, please contact chloe.sikes@idra.org.

References

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IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization led by Celina Moreno, J.D. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA strengthens and transforms public education by leading policy analyses and advocacy; dynamic teacher training and principal coaching; useful research, evaluation and frameworks for action; and innovative student, family and community engagement.