

Questions to Ask Your Legislator About School Vouchers

School vouchers and other programs that provide public funding for private schools, such as education savings accounts (ESAs), can significantly impact students and communities. Understanding the implications of these programs is crucial for both advocates and legislators. Below is a list of critical questions advocates should be asking their legislators about any proposed school voucher program.

A note on language: The following questions refer to school vouchers but can be applied to any type of school privatization effort, including ESAs or scholarship tax credits.

Questions on Funding & Fiscal Implications

- 1. What are the funding sources for this voucher program? Which section of the state's budget will be used?**
 - **Rationale:** It's essential to identify where funding for a voucher program is coming from, so that advocates can gauge how much this new expense will impact other critical budget allocations. Voucher programs that draw from general or education funds are especially harmful, as they take money away from already underfunded public schools.
- 2. What are the projected costs of the program for the first year, five years, and 10 years?**
 - **Rationale:** Accurate cost projections help prevent budget shortfalls. [Historical evidence](#) shows that underestimating the cost of a voucher program can have devastating consequences for states and can lead to large budget cuts for other essential public services. Advocates should compare any projected costs to other line items in the state budget and identify what alternative investments could be made using these funds.
- 3. Will there be limits on the amount of money or number of vouchers distributed each year? Will these limits change over time?**
 - **Rationale:** Without limits, program costs can escalate uncontrollably. Arizona failed to implement a limit on their voucher program and has seen costs balloon as a result.

4. What happens if more or fewer people apply for vouchers than expected?

- **Rationale:** Existing voucher programs have seen wide [variability](#) in demand. States must have contingency plans to protect themselves from exorbitant and unexpected costs as well as [unspent earmarked money](#) that cannot be used for much-needed public services.

5. Will there be hold-harmless funding (funding which guarantees districts get the same amount of money they did the previous year to ensure they don't face steep budget cuts over short periods of time) for districts that lose students to vouchers? If so, how will it be phased out?

- **Rationale:** Hold-harmless funding stabilizes school budgets by maintaining funding levels when enrollment drops. This prevents districts from experiencing extreme financial strain as a result of sudden funding decreases. This funding is necessary for districts' many fixed costs, such as building maintenance, which remain the same regardless of enrollment changes.

6. Will a voucher cover the full cost of private school tuition? If not, how will students – particularly those from low-income families – afford private school?

- **Rationale:** If a voucher does not cover the full cost of tuition, families are left to make up the difference. Even a small difference in price can make private schools inaccessible for families without financial means.

7. Will there be restrictions on what voucher funds can be spent on?

- **Rationale:** Clear guidelines prevent the misuse of voucher funds for non-educational purposes and ensure funds are used as intended. States that have failed to set clear guidelines have seen these funds [abused](#) -- harming both the state and the students the program was meant to serve.

Questions on Student Eligibility and Prioritization

1. Are there eligibility requirements based on income, disability status, or ZIP code? Will these requirements change over time?

- **Rationale:** Eligibility requirements ensure that public dollars go to those students with the largest financial need, rather than subsidizing private education for high-income families. Without eligibility requirements, states have seen their programs co-opted by those they were not intended to serve. This has already occurred in Arkansas, where [95% of students](#) enrolled in the state's voucher program have never attended public school.

2. Will students from low-income families or those with disabilities get priority access to the voucher program?

- **Rationale:** Public dollars should be targeted towards those students with the greatest needs, such as students from low-income families or those with disabilities, since the government has a responsibility to support these students in accessing equitable educational opportunities.

3. Will the amount of funding provided through a voucher vary based on students' needs?

- **Rationale:** Students with disabilities or those with unique needs often require additional resources. If these students are not provided with additional funds to cover their educational expenses, private schools may refuse to enroll them entirely or pass the burden of these costs onto students' families.

Questions on Quality of Schools Accepting Vouchers

1. What are the eligibility requirements for private schools that accept vouchers? Must they prove they can effectively educate students before accepting public funds?

- **Rationale:** Eligibility requirements ensure public funds support a high-quality education, preventing ineffective or unsafe schools from receiving vouchers. Public tax dollars should not be used to fund private schools without verifying foundational elements of school quality like sound finances, transparent public accountability data, and personnel background checks.

2. Will private schools accepting vouchers need to:

- Hold up-to-date accreditation from the state board of education?
- Ensure all teachers have valid teaching licenses?
- Ensure all personnel pass background checks?
- **Rationale:** These are all basic requirements for public schools, and parents may reasonably expect that private schools are held to the same standards. Without these requirements, the state could be helping students attend private schools that are not only ineffective, but don't have the appropriate oversight and safeguards in place to ensure student safety.

3. How will the state ensure private schools are fiscally sound before accepting vouchers? How will the state continue to monitor these schools' finances once they begin accepting vouchers?

- **Rationale:** Financial oversight prevents the misuse of public funds. This ensures schools remain operational and accountable to spending the funds on students, not [themselves](#).

Questions on School Accountability Measures

1. Will private schools accepting vouchers be required to administer statewide standardized tests and publicly report scores, disaggregated by demographics and voucher status?

- **Rationale:** Standardized tests provide comparable data on student performance, helping identify students in need of support and ensuring school accountability. Without this data, the state will not know if its investment of public dollars is providing a quality education for students.

2. How will the state hold private schools accountable for student performance? Will the state rate private schools using the same federally mandated rating system it uses for public schools?

- **Rationale:** Accountability measures ensure private schools deliver a high-quality education to students and know where to improve as needed. These measures ensure parents are informed about a school's quality before enrolling their child and allow taxpayers to monitor how well schools are using public funds to educate students.

3. Which curriculum standards will private schools accepting vouchers need to follow?

- **Rationale:** Curriculum standards ensure students receive a high-quality, comprehensive education that adequately prepares them for postsecondary opportunities.

Questions on Program Transparency

1. Will private schools accepting vouchers be included in federally mandated data collection efforts like the Civil Rights Data Collection, which monitors equitable access to educational opportunities?

- **Rationale:** Inclusive data collection efforts allow the federal government to monitor educational equity and outcomes. These processes ensure that all states are providing an equitable education to students, as is legally required.

2. How will the state ensure that private schools are transparent about the academic standards and general curricula they follow?

- **Rationale:** Public schools must follow curricula aligned to a research-based set of academic standards. Statewide assessments then measure students' mastery of these standards, the results of which are publicly reported. Voucher programs using public dollars should have similar requirements around curriculum transparency so taxpayers and parents understand the type of education students will receive.

3. Will the state release annual and easily accessible data on the voucher program, including:

- The number of students using vouchers, disaggregated by demographics?
- Voucher student enrollment numbers at each private school and the type of school these students attended prior to using a voucher?
- The cost of the voucher program to date?
- The academic performance of voucher students, disaggregated by demographics?
- **Rationale:** Publicly available data on voucher programs is essential. Without it, the state cannot monitor the program's implementation and its impact on students. Similarly, without public data, communities cannot monitor whether their public dollars are being spent wisely or advocate for adjustments as necessary.

4. Will private schools accepting vouchers be required to publicly report the racial and demographic composition of their staff and students?

- **Rationale:** Transparency in demographics helps ensure equity and allows for the monitoring of diversity within schools. Additionally, it allows parents and students to understand the racial and cultural environment they will be entering before deciding on a school.

5. How will the state ensure private schools accepting vouchers are transparent about tuition rates, fees, and admissions policies?

- **Rationale:** Given that the average private school tuition often exceeds the amount of funds provided by a voucher, transparency in costs and admissions policies prevents unexpected financial burdens on families.

6. How will the state monitor and limit tuition growth for private schools accepting vouchers?

- **Rationale:** Monitoring and limiting tuition growth prevents private schools from exploiting voucher funds. States with voucher programs have seen private schools drastically increase tuition rates by as much as [25%](#), which can render the voucher useless in covering costs for families.

Questions on Student Support Services

1. How will the state prevent private schools from discriminating against students, particularly students with disabilities and those from communities that have been traditionally shut out of educational opportunity? Will the same anti-discrimination protections be enforced at religious schools?

- **Rationale:** Anti-discrimination legislation -- such as the protections afforded in Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, Title IX of the Education Amendments Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act -- ensure all students have equal access to educational opportunities. These laws often do not apply to private schools, particularly religious schools, which [77% of private school students attend](#). Instead, private schools can reject students for a variety of reasons, including disability, gender identity, or income. Without clear protections for students, the state will be subsidizing private schools that do not provide equitable educational opportunities to students.

2. Which rights and protections will students with disabilities lose if they accept a voucher? Which protections and support services, if any, will the state continue to provide for these students?

- **Rationale:** [Multiple statutes](#) -- including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) -- provide students with disabilities the right to a high-quality education. These statutes do not apply to all private schools. Additionally, there is no guarantee that these statutes will be enforced in private schools or applied to the same extent that they are in public schools. This means students with disabilities would be at significant risk of losing the rights, protections, and support services that ensure they receive a high-quality education.

3. Will private schools be required to uphold all rights provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)? What enforcement and accountability mechanisms will the state use to ensure these rights are maintained?

- **Rationale:** The IDEA ensures that students with disabilities in public school receive a high-quality education tailored to their needs. [Fifteen percent of all students in US public schools](#) have some form of disability. Students with identified disabilities using a voucher often forfeit many of the protections provided to them in public schools under IDEA, such as receiving all services listed on an IEP or due process protections which allow parents to ensure their child is receiving appropriate educational services. Upholding IDEA rights prevents the erosion of protections for these students if they choose to use public funds for private school.

4. Given the lack of private schools in rural areas, how will students in these communities be able to participate in a voucher program?

- **Rationale:** The [19% of all public school students](#) who live in rural areas lack access to private schools, which are often spread across large distances, if they exist at all. This can make participating in a voucher program impossible for students in rural areas, even though their parents' tax dollars are funding the program.

5. How will the state ensure multilingual students are screened and receive high-quality English learning services if they choose to use a voucher?

- **Rationale:** Private schools are not required to conduct English language proficiency screenings or offer English learning programs. As students may use a voucher to enroll in school for the first time, the state must have a way to identify and track the progress of multilingual students to ensure they are receiving a high-quality education.

Implementation Questions

1. How does the state plan to educate the public about the new voucher program? Specifically, how does it plan to inform marginalized communities?

- **Rationale:** Public schools are required by law to ensure students and families are informed of their educational rights and the services they are entitled to. Voucher programs using public dollars should have a similar requirement. This is especially important for communities that may face societal, logistical, and institutional barriers in accessing information about a voucher program. Without intentional engagement, the state risks perpetuating a system that only benefits those with the money, time, and resources to access it. This has already occurred in Arizona, where [71% of students](#) using a voucher in 2023 came from private or homeschools.

2. How will the state ensure that all parents are informed of the rights they retain and lose when accepting a voucher?

- **Rationale:** Students' rights drastically decrease when moving from public to private schools, and parents are often unaware of these changes. A [Government Accountability Office report](#) found that in 2017 as many as 83% of parents did not know they had waived the rights afforded to them under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) when accepting a voucher. Informing parents of their rights prevents misunderstandings and ensures they make fully informed decisions about their children's education.

3. How will the state provide accessible information on:

- The average voucher amount?
- The average cost of private school tuition in the state?
- Eligibility requirements for vouchers?

- **Rationale:** A voucher is not a guaranteed ticket into any private school in the state. Clear and accessible information helps parents understand the practicalities and limitations of using a voucher before they choose to accept one.

4. How will the state make school quality data for private schools that accept vouchers accessible to parents?

- **Rationale:** Public access to academic data ensures transparency and helps parents make informed choices about their children's education. It also allows taxpayers to monitor whether their tax dollars are being well-spent at high-quality schools.