

Who Really Benefits from School Vouchers

School voucher programs — and such iterations as education savings accounts (ESAs) and tax credits — provide public funds for families to send their children to private schools. Despite claims that expanding access to vouchers will provide all families with greater educational choices, data shows that these programs **exclude students of color, those with specialized needs, and those from low-income backgrounds.**

So, who do school voucher programs benefit?

Wealthy Families: School voucher programs [disproportionately benefit](#) the most advantaged students, who are overwhelmingly [white](#) and [wealthy](#). Why?

- 1. Private School Costs Exceed Vouchers:** Vouchers rarely cover the full cost of attending private school, leaving families to make up the difference. In Arizona, for example, the average student receives [\\$6,000-\\$9,000](#) through the state's ESA program, while the average Arizona private school costs [\\$10,196](#). This means families must find ways to cover the \$4,196-\$1,196 gap. Families with higher incomes, who are often white, can more easily afford the remaining tuition and associated costs, making school vouchers a subsidy for families who already have the financial means to consider private school.
- 2. Tuition Increases:** Private schools often raise tuition -- in [some cases by as much as 25%](#) -- following the expansion of voucher programs. Wealthier families can afford to pay for these additional costs.
- 3. Tiered School Quality:** Not all private schools are created equal. The most prestigious, and highest quality private schools come with a higher price tag. Higher-income families can use vouchers to subsidize the cost of enrolling their children in these schools, which remain out-of-reach for low-income families. High-quality private schools are also [less likely to accept vouchers](#), while private schools that do are often [financially distressed](#). School voucher programs therefore [exacerbate](#) existing patterns of segregation within the school system.

Students Already Enrolled in Private School: When states have expanded voucher access to all families, regardless of income or need, these programs mainly benefit students who were never enrolled in public school. In Arkansas, for example, [95% of students](#) using vouchers didn't come from public schools, and in Arizona [71% of students](#) using ESAs in 2023 were already enrolled in private or homeschool. This undercuts the argument that school voucher programs expand educational choices for parents and give opportunities to students who otherwise wouldn't be able to access non-public schools.

Private Schools: Vouchers provide public funds to private schools, often with few, if any, stipulations. This allows private schools to operate in a self-serving manner, to the detriment of the public and those students most in need. How?

- 1. Selective Admissions:** Just because a private school accepts vouchers, doesn't mean it needs to admit every student who uses one. Private schools set their own admission requirements, which means they can exclude students who are often shut out of educational opportunities. In particular:
 - a. Private schools often prefer students with strong academic records. Students from schools serving majority Black, Brown, and low-income communities don't often have the test scores private schools are seeking as a result of the [systematic underfunding](#) of public schools in these areas.
 - b. Private schools often prefer students without discipline records, but [students of color](#) and [students with disabilities](#) are disproportionately disciplined in school, which can lead to their applications being denied.
 - c. Private schools often [don't serve students with disabilities](#) and those with specialized needs. While a few specialized schools have robust programs for students with disabilities, many lack the necessary resources or specialized staff to accommodate these students fully. Although public schools are required by law to provide appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities, private schools accepting vouchers often don't have the same obligations. Because of the extra cost associated with providing these students a high-quality education, private schools often deny enrollment to students who require educational accommodations.
 - d. Private schools may prefer students who share their religious beliefs; [77%](#) of private school students attend a school that is religiously affiliated. These schools often require students to follow their religious customs, excluding students from other faiths or students whose identities the school's faith does not support, such as LGBTQIA+ students and families.
- 2. Lack of Accountability:** Private schools accepting vouchers are not subject to the same accountability and transparency standards as public schools. They benefit from public funds without having to demonstrate how they effectively use these resources to serve students. This can result in inconsistent educational standards and practices, disproportionately affecting students who cannot afford to attend higher-quality private institutions that often cost more. This lack of accountability can also lead to the [misuse](#) of voucher or ESA funds, harming both students and the public.

The bottom line?

School voucher programs **do not expand educational choice for all families**. Instead, they subsidize the education of wealthy students, many of whom already attend private school, while deepening educational inequities that disproportionately harm students of color, students from low-income families, and students with disabilities. In doing so, they cause irreparable damage to our students and our communities.