

# Keep Public Funds in Public Schools

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*This brief is part of a series that explains EdTrust's core beliefs about how states should adequately and equitably fund public schools. To learn more, visit [edtrust.org/fair-funding-policy-positions](https://edtrust.org/fair-funding-policy-positions).*

Adequately and equitably resourced public schools are foundational to a thriving, democratic society. Yet, as public school funding remains inadequate and inequitable in most states, an increasing number of states are adopting private school choice policies such as vouchers, education savings accounts, and scholarship tax credits, that divert public funds to private schools. **EdTrust believes that the expansion of voucher programs and the growing drain of public funds threaten the survival and sustainability of public education systems.** Communities should resist legislators' efforts to impose private school choice policies in their states.

With more than [90% of school-aged children](#)<sup>1</sup> attending public schools, state leaders should be making deeper investments in their public education systems, not diverting taxpayer dollars to [opaque and unaccountable](#)<sup>2</sup> private school choice programs that serve a small percentage of students. State leaders must invest more in public schools so that districts and schools can meaningfully and sustainably do things like fund tutoring for fourth graders [struggling to read](#),<sup>3</sup> expand access to [advanced coursework](#)<sup>4</sup> in rural high schools, and support the needs of [English learners](#).<sup>5</sup>

While vouchers pose a variety of dangers to communities, **this brief focuses on how vouchers directly and indirectly drain funds from public schools.** EdTrust also created an advocacy toolkit that unpacks many of the other harms that vouchers impose on students and communities. The toolkit is actionable and designed to help advocates fight against vouchers in their states. For more information, view [Protect Public Schools: An Advocacy Toolkit to Fight School Voucher Programs](#).

*Vouchers are historically rooted in racism, segregation, and discrimination. In the 1950s and 1960s, local white leaders in southern states created voucher programs to circumvent federally mandated school desegregation. Across the South, local leaders slashed funds for public school systems attempting to integrate and instead funded vouchers to enable white families to send their children to racially-segregated private schools. Today, most private school students remain white.*

# Types of Private School Choice Programs

There are three main types of private school choice programs. The table below explains each of them. While they are all different in name and function, **EdTrust uses “vouchers” throughout the brief to refer to all private school choice programs unless specified differently.**

**Table 1. Types of Voucher Programs in States**

Program Name	Description
Voucher	Publicly funded scholarships that allow students to attend a private school instead of a public school. The state provides a set amount of money for private school tuition either to a caregiver or directly to the private school. Voucher amounts vary by state and may have certain eligibility requirements.
Education Savings Account (ESA)	Private savings accounts funded by a deposit from the state government and managed by a caregiver. After withdrawing their child from the public school system, caregivers use the funds to purchase specified educational services such as tutoring, online courses, or private school tuition. The amount provided via an ESA varies by state and may have certain eligibility requirements.
Scholarship Tax Credit	States provide a tax credit to businesses and individual taxpayers for donating funds to a nonprofit scholarship granting organization. These nonprofit organizations, which manage and distribute the funds, give private school tuition scholarships to eligible students.

**Source:** Wixom, M. A. (n.d.). School choice glossary. Education Commission of the States. [https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/School\\_Choice\\_Glossary-3.pdf](https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/School_Choice_Glossary-3.pdf)

# Vouchers Are Not a Golden Ticket to Opportunity for All as Proponents Claim

Vouchers are historically rooted in [racism](#),<sup>6</sup> segregation, and discrimination. In the 1950s and 1960s, local white leaders in southern states created voucher programs to circumvent federally mandated school desegregation. Across the South, local leaders slashed funds for public school systems attempting to integrate and instead [funded vouchers](#)<sup>7</sup> to enable white families to send their children to racially-segregated private schools. Today, most [private school students](#)<sup>8</sup> remain white.

The racist legacy of vouchers and private K-12 schooling should not be forgotten. Currently state leaders, especially those in Republican-controlled states, are universalizing voucher programs, removing income or other eligibility requirements. As the costs of expanded voucher programs increase across states and public schools lose enrollment, these programs will drain more public funding. This will reduce the amount of public funds that state leaders can invest in public schools, negatively impacting districts that are more reducing the amount of fund that state leaders can invest in public schools, negatively impacting districts that are more reliant on state funding. Most students using vouchers today have [never attended](#)<sup>9</sup> a public school and come from [wealthier families](#).<sup>10</sup> ProPublica [estimates](#)<sup>11</sup> that in Arizona, the first state to universalize its voucher program, 1 out of 10 school-aged students in the most economically disadvantaged zip codes use a voucher, compared to 3 out of 10 students in the richest zip codes. Other analysis of Arizona's voucher program shows that very [few English learners](#)<sup>12</sup> are accessing vouchers. In North Carolina, a state that removed income eligibility requirements for their voucher programs in 2023, white students are over-represented in the voucher program. While [44%](#)<sup>13</sup> of public students are white, [more than 60%](#)<sup>14</sup> of voucher participants were white in School Year 2023-24.

Rural students are nearly locked out of access to private schools with only [34% of rural students](#)<sup>15</sup> having a private school within five miles of where they live, compared with an average of 82% of all students having such access. This makes it hard, if not impossible, for rural families to use school vouchers.

There are many reasons communities should be concerned about vouchers. One concern is [weak state oversight and accountability](#)<sup>16</sup> over voucher programs and private schools. Private schools often do not have to administer the same state standardized tests as public schools, nor do they have to teach to the same academic standards. Additionally, private school teachers often do not have to meet the same licensure requirements as public school teachers — these conditions can severely harm student outcomes. Increasingly, [research](#)<sup>17</sup> shows that students who switch from a public school to private schools using a voucher perform worse academically. Another concern with vouchers are [selective admissions policies](#)<sup>18</sup> and discriminatory dress codes that exclude LGBTQ+ students, students with different religious beliefs, and students of color. Additionally, students and families do not have the same [special education rights](#)<sup>19</sup> and protections in private schools as they do within public schools. This is because private schools are not required to admit students with disabilities or provide [comprehensive special education services](#).<sup>20</sup> Additionally, they often lack the appropriate staff and expertise needed to meet these students' needs.

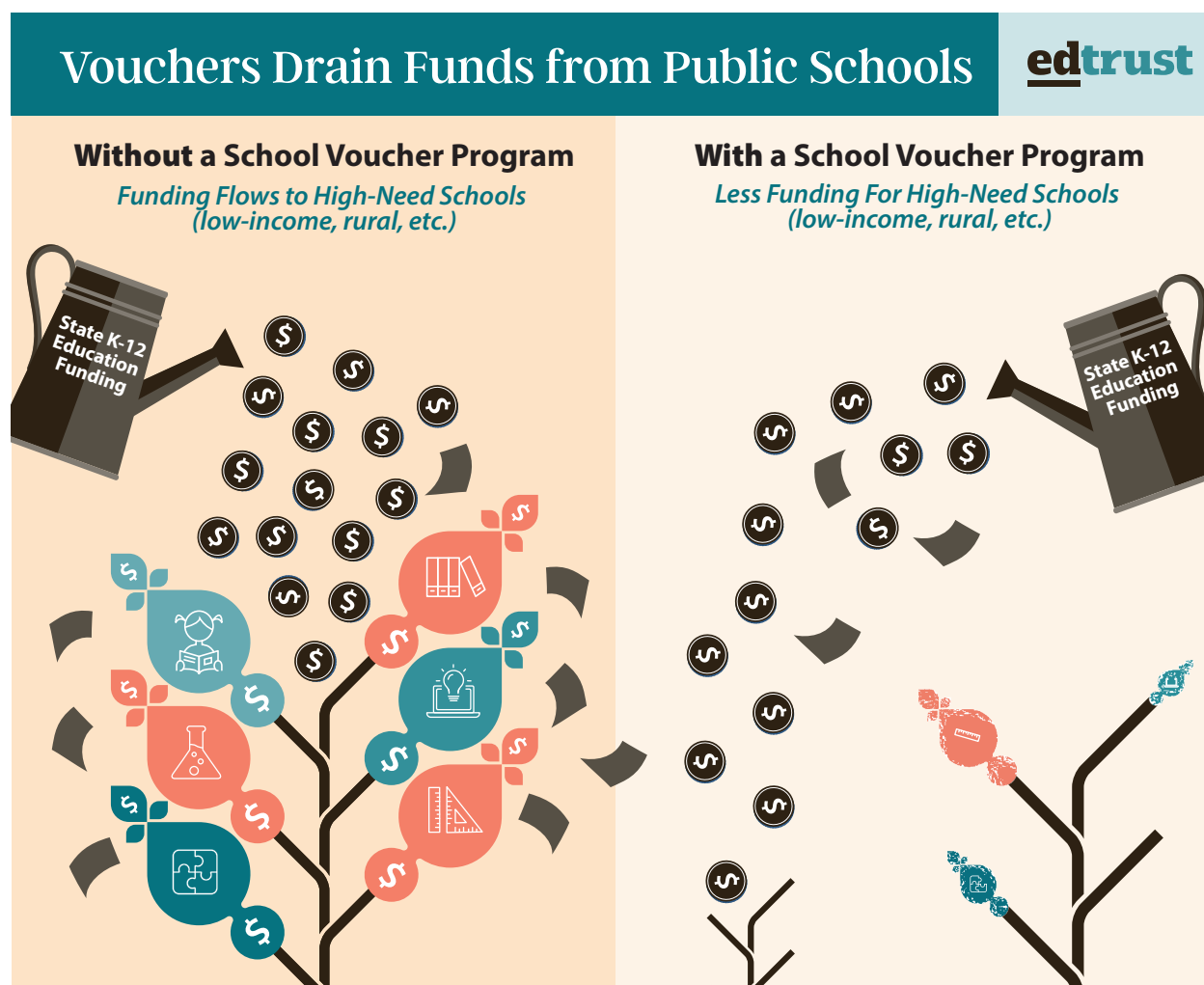
*States fund districts based on the number of students they serve. The federal government also provides dollars to states and districts to support underserved student groups including students living in poverty, rural students, and English learners, with many programs based on enrollment. As existing public school students switch over to private schools, districts, especially those serving students with the most needs, stand to lose essential state and federal dollars.*

Vouchers are not the ticket to opportunity that proponents claim. Beyond the previously mentioned issues, voucher amounts often fall short of the full cost of private school tuition, impacting families with low incomes that are unable to cover the gap in costs. Vouchers do not serve all students and are not a sustainable or equitable solution to systemic inequities in educational opportunities.

### ***Vouchers Drain Funds from Public Schools***

Vouchers can drain funds from public schools, directly and indirectly. The sections below explain these two mechanisms in detail.

**Figure 1.**



## How Vouchers Drain Funds From Public Schools Directly

States fund districts based on the number of students they serve. The federal government also provides dollars to states and districts to support underserved student groups including students living in poverty, rural students, and English learners, with many programs based on enrollment. As existing public school students switch over to private schools, districts, especially those serving students with the most needs, stand to lose essential state and federal dollars.

Importantly, districts do not automatically face lesser costs when student enrollment declines. Districts must still pay for things like building maintenance, utilities, and pension obligations that have costs that cannot be easily reduced. This means that as more students switch from public schools to private schools, local districts will need to make budget cuts or increase local taxes to keep up with their expenses.

Given the newness of universal vouchers, [researchers](#)<sup>21</sup> are still gathering evidence on the extent of their [direct fiscal impact](#)<sup>22</sup> on public school budgets. News reports, however, illustrate the harm vouchers are causing in some districts. For example, the Iowa City school district had [135 students](#)<sup>23</sup> switch over to a private school in School Year 2023-24; a figure that was higher than district officials predicted. The district lost [\\$1.3 million](#)<sup>24</sup> in state revenue as a result of the expanded voucher program, the equivalent of [11 full-time teaching positions](#).<sup>25</sup> This funding loss is detrimental to the thousands of students still attending public schools, 41% of whom are eligible for [free or reduced-price lunch](#)<sup>26</sup> and 47% of whom are of color. These students should be receiving more support, yet expanded vouchers led, in part, to their district having to [lay off teachers](#)<sup>27</sup> and delay the purchasing of needed curriculum materials.

## Voucher Expansion Estimated to Drain Millions from North Carolina Public Schools

In 2023, North Carolina legislators removed income limits for the Opportunity Scholarship (OS) program, expanding the program to every school-aged student in the state. The Office of the State Budget and Management (OSBM) estimates that the new voucher expansion could siphon between [\\$15 million and \\$30 million](#)<sup>28</sup> from public schools in fiscal year (FY) 2025-26. The total loss to public school budgets depends on the percentage of existing public school students who switch to private schools. In November 2024, legislators overrode then-Governor Roy Cooper's veto of their "[mini budget](#)" they voted on and passed to add \$248 million to clear a waitlist of 54,000 students that were primarily from wealthier households. Additionally, the legislature added \$215.4 million to the FY 2024-25 budget, which will bring total spending on vouchers to more than half a billion dollars. By 2031-32, the legislature intends to invest \$800 million in the voucher program. Meanwhile, legislators did not include any funds in the mini budget to [raise public teachers' salaries](#),<sup>29</sup> which is problematic

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*Vouchers are costly and drain funds from state budgets, thus reducing the amount of available revenue that legislators should be investing in public education and other critical public services. This is because as states expand eligibility, more and more public dollars must be diverted to cover program costs. Making matters worse, many states that are ramping up investments in vouchers have adopted inequitable individual and corporate tax policies, reducing the overall amount of revenue collected by the state.*

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given that North Carolina is in the [bottom 13 states](#) with the lowest average teacher salaries.<sup>30</sup>

When legislators first established the OS program in 2013, their goal was to target funds to low-income students. Initially, 50% of recipients were [Black students](#).<sup>31</sup> Today, the program overwhelmingly funds the private education of [white students](#).<sup>32</sup> Vouchers are now awarded in [four tiers](#), with students from the lowest income households receiving the full voucher amount of about \$7,500 and students from wealthiest households eligible for a voucher of about \$4,500.<sup>33</sup> Data from OSBM show that most of the new applicants to the expanded OS program are concentrated in the [10 wealthiest counties](#)<sup>34</sup> in the state, including Wake County (1st) and Mecklenburg County (7th).

North Carolina's students, families, and public educators deserve better. Increasing investments in vouchers while not making much needed investments in the state's public education system does not support the needs of most students in the state. Legislators' expansion of vouchers puts North Carolina further off track in complying with the decades long [Leandro rulings](#) that mandate the state to provide all students with a "sound basic education that includes competent and well-trained teachers and principals, as well as equitable access to sufficient resources."<sup>35</sup> North Carolina policymakers should instead be doubling down on [improving funding](#)<sup>36</sup> for public schools, according to recommendations from advocates that have long urged the need for more funding.

## *How Vouchers Drain Funds Indirectly*

Vouchers are costly and [drain funds from state budgets](#),<sup>37</sup> thus reducing the amount of available revenue that legislators should be investing in public education and other critical public services. This is because as states expand eligibility, more and more public dollars must be diverted to cover program costs. Making matters worse, many states that are ramping up investments in vouchers have adopted [inequitable individual and corporate tax policies](#),<sup>38</sup> reducing the overall amount of revenue collected by the state. Declining availability of state revenue for public education hurts low-wealth and rural communities the most as they tend to be more dependent upon state funding due to their inability to generate sufficient revenue locally. To read more about inequities within local school funding policies, read [Make Local School Funding Fairer](#).

Below are some explanations of why and how vouchers drain funds from public schools indirectly.

### **Actual Voucher Program Costs Are Higher Than Initial Estimates and Budget Appropriations, Draining Revenues**

In many states, most students using vouchers have never been in public schools. A [report](#)<sup>39</sup> estimates that between 65% and 90% of students using vouchers were already enrolled in private schools, homeschooled, or just starting kindergarten. Consequently, these students represent an entirely new cost that state governments must pay for either by raising revenue or cutting spending on public schools and other publicly funded services.

Actual voucher programs are costing much more than states initially estimate and/or approve in state budgets. No other state illustrates this better than Arizona where actual spending far outpaced what the state initially [estimated](#)<sup>40</sup> and [budgeted](#).<sup>41</sup> Arizona removed income eligibility requirements and does not cap how many vouchers are available, thus leading to runaway state spending on the program. Analysis shows that the state's ESA program contributed to half of the state's [budget deficit](#)<sup>42</sup> in fiscal year 2024 and two-thirds of the projected fiscal year 2025 deficit. To address the budget shortfall, legislators [cut funding](#)<sup>43</sup> for important public services

including housing assistance programs, water infrastructure projects, and a state college scholarship program for students from low-income backgrounds.

The unmitigated growth of voucher programs is putting pressure on state budgets, draining funds for important public services, especially schools. Arizona and North Carolina illustrate how costly voucher programs are and why advocates should be deeply concerned about current trends to expand them.

### **Scholarship Tax Credits Reduce State Revenues**

Scholarship tax credit programs drain funds for public schools by allowing [wealthy individuals and businesses](#)<sup>44</sup> to pay less than their fair share in taxes. Individuals and businesses donate funds to nonprofit scholarship-granting organizations that provide private school scholarships to students — donors get to claim their donations on their taxes to reduce how much they owe in taxes. In some states, donors can even donate shares of stock rather than cash. The less donors pay in taxes, the less revenue states collect, the less funding is available for states to invest in public schools. Additionally concerning is that in nine states, not only do donors pay less in taxes, but they can even turn a [profit](#)<sup>45</sup> on their donations. In 2017, at least 17 states were diverting more than [\\$1 billion](#)<sup>46</sup> a year toward private schools via scholarship tax credits.

Diverting public funds to finance vouchers is harmful and many students and families do not support such policies. In November 2024, voucher-related policies failed in three states, with voters in Kentucky and Colorado rejecting voucher-related ballot measures and Nebraskans voting to repeal a voucher law. Vouchers are a failed policy that threatens the sustainability of public schools. Policymakers need to listen to their constituents and take responsibility for funding public schools better and ensure that every student's needs can be met in a public school environment.



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