

Do school vouchers help kids in struggling schools?

No. Vouchers, often misleadingly called “scholarships,” divert tax dollars meant for public education to private schools that are not accountable to the public and generally do not serve the interests of struggling, low-income students.

This is why

Vouchers are a “coupon program” for private education.

Families who already send their children to private schools are often those who apply for and get the vouchers.

Vouchers don’t expand education opportunities for low-income students. The amount of money contributed by the voucher is hardly ever enough to pay for full private school tuition. Private schools are not obligated to take vouchers. Often those that do are under enrolled and struggling.

Vouchers promote discrimination. Despite receiving tax dollars, private voucher schools are often free to turn away students who are gay or transgender and students who don’t subscribe to a religious doctrine.

Vouchers violate separation of church and state.

Once money leaves the public system, there’s no public accountability for what the school teaches to students, including religious doctrine such as biblically inspired explanations for the origin of the universe and life and views of American history that distort the truth about slavery and the importance of civil disobedience in a democracy.

Vouchers don’t improve opportunities for struggling students. Private schools can cherry pick who they want to educate by limiting services for students with learning disabilities and enforcing strict academic or discipline entry requirements.

Vouchers don’t improve education. The programs often have negative effects on the academic achievement of students.

Look at the facts

In **Wisconsin**, 75% of students who applied for the statewide voucher program already attended private schools.¹

More than half of students receiving vouchers in **Indiana** have never attended Indiana public schools. Only 3% of voucher recipients are leaving the state’s worst schools.²

In **Arizona**, the state’s tax credit programs that pay for vouchers designate only about 3% of voucher money to special-needs students, and barely a third goes to children of low-income families.³

In **Nevada**, most applicants for vouchers were not from low-income areas in the state. They came from neighborhoods that already had access to the highest-performing public schools.^{4,5}

A **national analysis** of voucher programs found most programs do not cover enough of the tuition to enable poor minority children to access the best private schools.⁶

A review of the effects of a statewide voucher program in **Charlotte, North Carolina** found a significant number of voucher-receiving schools prohibit lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender students from enrolling.⁷

During the first year of a voucher program in **North Carolina**, the state spent \$12 million for students to transfer to private schools. About \$11 million went to faith-based schools.⁸

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A study of the nation’s oldest voucher program in **Milwaukee** found that private schools that receive the vouchers can select the best students and “counsel out” or expel students that present the most difficulties.⁹

In **Indiana**, school vouchers lowered academic achievement. An average student with a math score at the 50th percentile

declined to the 44th percentile after one year of enrollment in private school.¹⁰

Students who used a voucher program in **Louisiana** to attend a private school experienced lowered math, reading, science and social studies scores. Their likelihood of a failing score increased by 24 to 50 percent.¹¹

WHAT PRIVATIZERS BELIEVE	WHAT WE BELIEVE
School vouchers increase education opportunities for students.	School vouchers create opportunities for private, unaccountable schools to obtain tax dollars.
School vouchers provide students a pathway out of poverty.	School vouchers provide those families who already have the means to attend private schools a government subsidy.
School vouchers are a civil rights cause.	School vouchers lead to more discrimination and inequity in education.
School vouchers are a solution for families in need of better schools.	School vouchers lower the quality of education for all students and diminish the capacity of the entire education system.

Bottom Line

Voucher programs, in all their many forms, are not a solution for struggling students and families who want better education opportunities. The overall negative effects of vouchers on public school communities, especially the least well-served communities, negate any positive effects vouchers may have on an isolated family or small population of students. What’s needed instead are policies that address inequities in our public education system and provide more education opportunities for all students. Vouchers are a gift of taxpayer funds to private and religious schools that if expanded will cost American taxpayers billions of dollars.

¹ "75% of state voucher program applicants already attend private school," Edgar Mendez, Milwaukee Wisconsin Journal Sentinel, May 2014.

² "How Indiana's school voucher program soared," Mandy McLaren and Emma Brown, Investigative Reporting Workshop, American University School of Communications, December 2016.

³ "Arizona private-school families cash in on state's tax-credit program," Alia Beard Rau, The Republic.

⁴ "Most applicants for school-choice program are from wealthy neighborhoods," Neal Morton and Adelaide Chen, Las Vegas Review-Journal, October 29, 2015.

⁵ "Thousands more applications for ESAs show affluent ZIP codes still dominating," Ian Whitaker, Las Vegas Sun, Jan. 25, 2017.

⁶ "Race and School Vouchers: Legal, Historical, and Political Contexts," Mark A. Gooden, Huriya Jabbar, and Mario S. Torres, Jr., Peabody Journal of Education, Volume 91, 2016 - Issue 4.

⁷ "Some schools get state money, deny gay enrollment," Rachel Stone and Jane Little, Charlotte Observer, August 12, 2016.

⁸ "Praying for options: Religious schools dominate NC voucher program," Ann Doss Helms, Charlotte Observer, April 8, 2016.

⁹ "School Vouchers and Student Attainment: Evidence from a State-Mandated Study of Milwaukee's Parental Choice Program," Joshua M. Cowen, David J. Fleming, John F. Witte, Patrick J. Wolf, and Brian Kisida, Policy Studies Journal, February 2013.

¹⁰ "On negative effects of vouchers," Mark Dynarski, Brookings, May 26, 2016.

¹¹ "How has the Louisiana Scholarship Program Affected Students? A Comprehensive Summary of Effects after Two Years," Jonathan N. Mills, Anna J. Egalite, and Patrick J. Wolf, Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, 2016.

