



Education Savings Accounts Are Inefficient, Ineffective and Unaccountable to Texas Students

IDRA Testimony against SB 8, 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 8, and any other legislative proposals that divert public school funds for private use, particularly without any public transparency or accountability. SB 8 takes the state farther away from the goals of fair school funding and parent and community accountability over education quality.

SB 8 Creates an Inefficient and Expensive Private School Voucher Program Without Guardrails

Texas public schools serve all students as part of the state's constitutional obligation to provide an efficient public education system. SB 8 creates a separate, inefficient system of publicly-funded educational assistance organizations.

The education savings account (ESA) program would funnel \$8,000 per participant to certified educational assistance organizations (CEAO) and offer ultimately a \$20,000 per participant hold harmless provision for the majority of affected Texas school districts. 954 Texas school districts enroll fewer than 20,000 students. The price tag of the ESA totals \$36,000 for one participant from a smaller district to participate for two years. This is over four times the amount of average per-pupil state and local funding in Texas, of \$8,160 (Hanson, 2022).

In Florida, similar private school voucher programs now consume 10% of the state's public education funding. If we assumed the same financial impact to all the school districts that you each represent, the cost would be over \$3.12 billion among this committee alone (IDRA analysis, by request).

SB 8 Promotes Ineffective Educational Programs Without Parent Transparency or Accountability

Private school voucher programs across the country rarely require financial transparency or academic accountability measures, and SB 8 is no different. The bill contains no financial or academic reporting requirements for participating EAOs. With four times the per-pupil funding,

CEAOs would not be held accountable for students' performance in reading and math, learning progress or accelerated learning by grade level, graduation rates, or postsecondary outcomes.

There is cause for concern. Studies have found that private school vouchers do not improve student achievement. For instance, researchers at the University of Arkansas published a four-year study analyzing assessment data from students who used the Louisiana Scholarship Program. The results concluded that students using the program did visibly worse on state assessments four years later than their counterparts in public schools (Mills & Wolf, 2019). Similar negative trends have held true across programs in Indiana, Washington, D.C., Alabama, and Ohio.

In fact, in contrast to the calls for greater transparency in public schools, parents enrolling a student with disabilities into the ESA program waive their rights to any state or federal disabilities or special education protections.

A 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. This an inefficient and unaccountable use of public education funds. 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

- Abrams, S.E., & Koutsavlis, S.J. (March 2023). The Fiscal Consequences of Private School Vouchers. Southern Poverty Law Center, Education Law Center, Public Funds Public Schools. https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/SPLC_ELC_PFPS_2023Report_Final.pdf
- Hanson, M. (June 15, 2022). U.S. Public Education Spending Statistics. Education Data Initiative. <https://educationdata.org/public-education-spending-statistics>
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- Prothero, A., & Harwin, A. (February 28, 2020). Private School Choice Programs Fall Short on Transparency, Accountability. Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/private-school-choice-programs-fall-short-on-transparency-accountability/2020/02?r=2000718806#database>

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.