



Education Saving Accounts Harm Texas Students' Access to an Equitable Education

TLEEC Testimony Against Senate Bill 2, submitted by Kaci Wright to the Texas Senate Committee on K-16 Education, January 28, 2025

Dear Chairman Creighton and members of the Education Committee,

My name is Kaci Wright, and I am an IDRA Education Policy Fellow testifying on behalf of the Texas Legislative Education Equity Coalition (TLEEC) against Senate Bill 2. The coalition is a statewide collaborative of more than 38 organizations and individuals with the mission to improve the quality of public education for all children, with a focus on racial equity. We advocate at the local, state and national levels for high-quality teaching, curriculum and instructional practices, bilingual education, as well as fair funding and enhanced college access and success.

TLEEC opposes SB 2 because research has shown that voucher systems across the country are ineffective for students and divert necessary public funding away from public schools. The majority of Texas public school students are Latino, Black, and from households with low-incomes. Twenty-three percent are emergent bilingual students, and 14% receive special education services. These students stand to lose the most from a universal, statewide voucher program.

Texas Schools Need Funding Now

As a former teacher, I have witnessed firsthand the support our students need, and I do not believe that ESA's or any program that doesn't prioritize the financial needs of public schools will help.

Each school where I have worked has wanted to do more to increase opportunities for students but was held back by the increase in inflation and the turnover of staff. Schools are struggling. The state legislature has the power to help. But a voucher program would be a step in the wrong direction.

Voucher programs are expensive. The proposed budget would designate \$1 billion to be invested in the program while across the state school districts are having to close schools and cut resources due to budget deficits.

Austin ISD, a school district I have taught in, was facing a \$112 million budget deficit and had to call a voter approval tax rate election to cut it down to \$89 million (Pauda & Wiley, 2024). This is due to the failure of the state to properly fund education through the basic allotment. Investing in the basic allotment supports every student and uplifts all schools by creating opportunities to improve what makes a school successful, including retaining and paying high quality teachers, purchasing useful materials for learning, and establishing innovative research-driven programs that prepare all students for success. These investments will be far out of reach if voucher bills like SB 2 drain money from schools by putting pressure on the state budget and reducing districts' attendance funding.

With Texas considering a larger and more expensive voucher program than any other state, it is likely that it will only lead to a large bill at the expense of taxpayers and public schools.

Education Savings Accounts Benefit Students Already in Private School

Senate Bill 2 is a universal voucher program that will allow any family with a school-aged child to participate. Although the program claims to provide support for students to find alternative schooling options, universal vouchers in other states have proven to largely benefit students who were already attending private schools.

Arkansas is one example, as 95% of voucher recipients never attended public school before receiving a voucher (Arkansas Department of Education, 2023). Florida, which expanded its voucher program to be universal in 2023, had only 13% of new participants who previously attended a public school, and 44% of new participants came from families that earned more than \$120,000 for a household of four or did not submit their income (Priour, 2023).

The Texas Legislature should be investing in what we know works instead of creating a billion-dollar program that research has shown is unsuccessful for students. If the state truly wants to pass legislation that will impact the millions of Texas students who are currently in our public schools, the first step is to improve their current education setting, not to create a program that will be out of reach for them to use.

Recommendations

The legislature needs to invest in public schools in order to provide the 90% of Texas children attending public schools with a high quality schooling experience. TLEEC urges the following recommendations.

- Increase the basic allotment to account for inflation, which has not been increased since 2019.
- Increase funding for special populations, including emergent bilingual students and students receiving special education.
- Keep public dollars in public schools.

Thank you for your consideration.

For questions, please contact TLEEC either through Kaci Wright at IDRA (kaci.wright@idra.org), Dr. Chloe Latham Sikes at IDRA (chloe.sikes@idra.org), or Jaime Puente at Every Texan (puente@everytexan.org).

Resources

Arkansas Department of Education. (September 20, 2023). Education Freedom Account Annual Report. <https://arkansasadvocate.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/EFA-Transparency-Report.pdf>

Griffith, M., & Burns, D. (2024). Understanding the Cost of Universal School Vouchers: An Analysis of Arizona’s Empowerment Scholarship Account Program. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/682.951>

Pauda, E., & Wiley, K. (August 20, 2024). *Facing Budget Deficit, Austin ISD Board Approves Tax Rate Election*. KXAN Austin. <https://www.kxan.com/news/local/austin/facing-budget-deficit-austin-isd-board-approves-tax-rate-election/>

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TLEEC Member Organizations

ARISE Adelante
Asian Texans for Justice
Austin Justice Coalition
Big Thought
Black Parents and Families Collective
Breakthrough Central Texas
Coalition of Texans with Disabilities
Culturingua

National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS) – Tejas Foco
San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
SEAT (Students Engaged in Advancing Texas)
Southwest Region Youth Legislative Action Center
Texas American Federation of Teachers
Texas Association for Bilingual Education (TABE)
Texas Association for Chicanos in Higher Education (TACHE)

Dr. Hector P. García G.I. Forum
Easterseals Central Texas
Educators in Solidarity (EIS)
Ethnic Studies Network of Texas (ESNTX)
Every Texan
Houston Community Voices for Public Education
IDRA
McNeil Educational Foundation for Ecumenical Leadership
Measure
Mexican American Civil Rights Institute (MACRI)
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund
(MALDEF)
Mexican American School Board Members Association
(MASBA)

Texas Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education
(TADOHE)
Texas Association of Mexican American Chambers of
Commerce (TAMACC)
Texas Center for Education Policy at the University of Texas
– Austin
Texas Hispanics Organized for Political Education (HOPE)
Texas League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
Texas NAACP
Texas State Teachers Association (TSTA)
The Arc of Texas
UnidosUS (formerly known as NCLR)
UP Partnership