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The Federal Voucher Program Doubling Down on Harming Students and Public Schools

By Morgan Craven, J.D.

The July 2025 budget reconciliation bill (aka the *Big Beautiful Bill Act*) included a federal private school voucher program that, like other voucher programs, could siphon billions of public tax dollars away from public services that benefit millions of children and families, for the benefit of a select few individual families.

The federal voucher program is a threat to public education and to the diverse students and families in our public schools.

Beginning in the 2027 tax year, the federal program will provide a dollar-for-dollar tax credit to individuals who donate to scholarship-granting organizations (SGOs). These organizations provide vouchers to families to send their children to private schools and/or cover other educational expenses, like tutoring, uniforms, transportation or supplies.

These vouchers will be available to families whose household income is less than 300% of the area median income, opening them up to 90% of families, some with incomes of more than half a million dollars (PFPS, 2026).

The law caps eligible individual contributions for the tax credit at \$1,700 per year. But the law provides no cap on funding for the program, potentially costing tens of billions of dollars in federal tax dollars each year (Davis, 2025).

This is taxpayer money that will no longer be available for public use on public goods, including programs that serve children and families across the country. And, unless federal or state regulations prohibit it, the federal program could allow significant funds to be concentrated in single communities.

For example, a religious community that operates a private school receiving vouchers could also act as an SGO. Parishioners in a Catholic community, for instance, could donate to their SGO and receive the tax credit. The diocese that operates their local Catholic churches could then use the money to fund its own schools and collect the 10% administrative funds for SGOs the law allows.

In this scenario, all money that would otherwise be paid into the public coffers would stay within that single religious community, to the detriment of the public and the public schools that serve the majority of children around it.

Many details of how the vouchers will operate will be outlined in yet-to-be-released federal and state regulations. In a public comment submitted to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) regarding these regulations, IDRA noted the inherent harms of voucher programs and urged transparency, accountability and oversight. However, those critical elements tend to be at odds with voucher program design.

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The massive diversion of funds weakens educational opportunities for the majority of children who attend public schools in this country.

(The Federal Voucher Program, continued from Page 1)

A growing body of evidence documenting the negative impact of state vouchers demonstrates the harms that can be caused to students and the public schools that lose much-needed public resources. The expansion of these programs through the federal voucher will divert public funds away from public programs and allow them to be used in ways that undermine civil rights protections, weaken public education systems, and exacerbate longstanding educational inequities. (IDRA, 2026)

These harms are inherent to private school voucher programs, and along with other organizations, families, educators and students across the country, IDRA has opposed the implementation of the federal voucher program.

Federal-State Voucher Program Double Dipping

The federal voucher program is open to individuals who may also be taking advantage of state vouchers. States can decide whether to accept the program. As of mid-March, 29 states have opted into the federal program, or their governors have announced their intention to do so (Stone et al., 2026).

For example, in late January, Georgia's Governor Brian Kemp announced the state would opt into the federal program. This decision was made without public input or consultation with the legislature, even though, like other states, Georgia has consistently underfunded its public schools and has implemented a state voucher system that lacks sufficient transparency and accountability, according to the state's own Department of Audits (Arciaga, 2026).

In Texas, Governor Greg Abbott announced in late 2025 his intention to opt the state into the federal voucher program. This will add to the

state's own new robust voucher scheme, which has already attracted more than 200,000 applicants – more than are covered in the state's initial budget for the program (a fact that will surely be used to argue for program expansion) (Texas Comptroller, 2026).

An analysis of state data obtained by the Texas Center for Voucher Transparency shows that three out of four of these applicants are likely already enrolled in private schools or are homeschooled, despite proponent's claims that vouchers will "save" students from struggling public schools (Yu, 2026). By subsidizing private education and paying families whose students have not attended public schools, the program could drive up costs to the state by millions of dollars.

Heightened Harms to Students and Public Schools

The federal voucher program will exacerbate the harms of state programs by expanding taxpayer-funded private school options for individual families and enabling further divestment from public education. This massive diversion of funds weakens educational opportunities and other publicly funded programs for the majority of children attending public schools in this country.

Denying public schools much-needed public funds harms children of every background in every state and community across the country, including those with disabilities and those who make up the majority of public school students: Black, Latino and Indigenous children, children from families with limited means and children in rural communities (see IDRA et al., 2025).

(cont. on Page 4)

It is important to continue telling members of Congress to oppose the program when opportunities arise, and to invest in public education and other programs and protections for the diverse students in our schools.

The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) is a non-profit organization with a 501(c)(3) tax exempt status. 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.

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Publicly Funded Vouchers Facilitate Publicly Funded Discrimination

Recent Lawsuits Highlight Injustice and Inequity in Texas' Voucher Program

By Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D.

IDRA and our partners have long opposed discriminatory school privatization efforts like state-funded private school vouchers. During the last Texas legislative session and in the decades leading up to it, advocates warned such a program would have a discriminatory impact at best, fueled by discriminatory intent at worst (Duggins-Clay, 2025).

Two recently filed lawsuits illustrate this now-reality and should serve as a clear warning to families and policymakers in Texas and across the nation to reject and repeal privatization programs like vouchers and tax credits.

Public Education is a Fundamental Right for All Children

Public schools were created specifically so that all children could be educated regardless of their families' economic status. Emphasizing this point, every state in the United States has adopted an "education clause" in its state constitution that guarantees the right of every child to attend a quality public school (Hunter, 2011).

This fundamental right applies to every child, regardless of their income, race, ethnic origin, foster or homeless status, gender, military family status, primary language, religion, immigration status or disability status.

Put simply, public schools are the backbone of our democracy and our economy. The public tax dollars that sustain them should never be diverted to special interests or private organizations that have the power to discriminate in their policies and practices.

Private Schools Have the Power to Discriminate

Voucher systems that allow individual families and private schools to access public funding for private education perpetuate discrimination by creating even more unequal and less accountable education systems.

Diverse stakeholders across the political and ideological spectrum have repeatedly presented evidence demonstrating that a publicly funded voucher program in Texas will facilitate discrimination against and segregation of our state's most vulnerable students, including students historically marginalized on the basis of race, students with disabilities, students from religious minorities, LGBTQ+ students, emergent bilingual students, rural students, and students from low-income families (Duggins-Clay, 2023).

When the state funds vouchers, it underwrites discrimination.

Because most private schools do not choose to fully comply with our nation's civil rights laws, students and families frequently face discrimination when they try to enroll in a private school or after they are admitted (PFPS, 2023). Even when the discriminatory exclusion is not explicit, relying on the predictable result of admissions policies and practices that prioritize students who identify with a particular religion, neighborhood, physical or mental ability, or income level to achieve a homogeneous school community is discrimination.

The discriminatory impact of the Texas program is by design.

Muslim Students and Islamic Schools Initially Excluded from the Voucher Program

Adding to the layer of practices that facilitate state-sponsored discrimination through private school vouchers, Texas leaders doubled down by excluding school and families from participation on the basis of their religion, ethnicity and national origin.

It was bad enough that Texas legislators gave private schools a blank check to discriminate with Texans' hard-earned taxpayer dollars. (cont. on Page 4)

When the state funds vouchers, it underwrites discrimination.

(Publicly Funded Vouchers Facilitate Publicly Funded Discrimination, continued from Page 3)

Then, it seems the state categorically excluded entire communities on the basis of who they are.

To date, two federal lawsuits have asked the court to block the voucher program from discriminating on the basis of religion (Edison, 2026a). The first case was filed on March 1 by a Houston-area family who attend an Islamic private school. The second case was filed on March 11 by three parents and three private schools in Dallas, Collin and Galveston counties.

The plaintiffs in these lawsuits allege that the state voucher program has not accepted a single Islamic-affiliated entity as eligible to receive voucher funds on behalf of a qualifying family. If proven true, that fact would be compelling evidence of discrimination.

A federal judge ordered the state to extend the application deadline for private school vouchers and to allow the schools in the lawsuit to register for the program. The state then accepted only those Islamic schools into the program. (Edison, 2026b)

Texas Must Uphold Students' Constitutional Right to Public Education

If state officials supporting voucher have their way, Muslim students will be the first but not the last targets of discrimination in education.

The voucher law not only lacks civil rights protections for program participants; it also explicitly allows private education providers paid through the voucher to discriminate against students, family members and employees on a variety of grounds. These include allowing discrimination on the basis of religion, gender, disability status, national origin and emergent bilingual status.

Further, the voucher law explicitly requires students to forfeit many of their civil rights, such as access to disability and English learner resources upon admission into the program (Latham Sikes, 2025).

The Texas Bill of Rights unequivocally states, "Equality under the law shall not be denied or abridged because of sex, race, color, creed or national origin" (Tex. Const. Art. 1, Sec. 3a). Federal law and the U.S. Constitution guarantee similar protections.

The voucher program's authorization and even incentivization of private discrimination through public funds clearly violates this sacred principle.

We hope and expect that the courts will reaffirm that the state and our taxpayer-funded institutions cannot discriminate against individuals and communities on the basis of their race, ethnicity and religion. The recently filed lawsuits are a warning to Texans and a call to

action to ensure no child, family or community is excluded or treated unfairly because of who they are.

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(The Federal Voucher Program, continued from Page 2)

The programs also compromise civil rights protections for vulnerable students and threaten to increase economic and racial segregation in schools (Kahlenberg et al., 2016). Voucher programs often provide little oversight, accountability or transparency regarding where and how funds are used and whether students who use them are receiving a quality education (see IDRA et al., 2025).

Continued Advocacy is Critical

Despite the passage of the federal program, IDRA and many other individual and organizational advocates continue to oppose it fundamentally and to push for robust regulation that provides some level of protection for students and public schools.

It is important to continue telling members of Congress to oppose the program when opportunities arise, and to invest in public education and other programs and protections for the diverse students in our schools.

For more information about IDRA's work, sign up for updates (<https://idra.news/GetUpdates>) and see advocacy tools and tips at www.idrasreen.org.

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My Child is Starting Kindergarten. Texas' Voucher Program Worries Me.

by Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D.

I'm excited for my son to start kindergarten next year. I went through Texas public schools myself, and I want that experience for him. But I worry it won't offer the same fairness or opportunity I once had.

As a parent and policy researcher for IDRA, I spent the last three years reviewing the evidence about school vouchers. I worry when I see our legislators ignore what is happening in other states where vouchers stretch state budgets, lower student spending for public schools, and lead to some of the steepest academic declines on record, worse than those following Hurricane Katrina and COVID-19 (Cowen, 2025).

At the same time, I've felt the cost of child-care and early education rise, leaving families stretched and uncertain. It's easy to understand why the highest number of voucher applications have been for pre-kindergarten students (Hancock, 2026b).

Well-funded public schools can make a difference by offering after-school programs, health services, community events, and parent support specialists and counselors. Yet, as we watch schools close and programs end due to budget constraints, I'm increasingly anxious about what support my son will have in school.

I know our state's new voucher program will only make matters worse (OSOD, 2026). I want my son in public school because I want his school to be accountable to families and serve all students, and well-funded enough to keep that promise.

As applications to the school voucher program are underway, parents are asked to make choices without clear information about what this program will actually cost the state or their family.

Vouchers aren't free money. They are public dollars repurposed. We all pay for it, whether we use them or not.

In practice, vouchers don't cover the full cost of private school tuition and only apply after a child is enrolled, leaving families to pay up-front costs and ongoing balances. And even for families who never apply, the cost shows up elsewhere.

Voucher funding comes from the same budget that supports public schools and local services. As the program grows, those dollars compete, and families will feel the trade-offs in cuts to school programs, staffing and local services.

In this first year, the voucher program is estimated to cost Texans \$1 billion (Edison, 2025). Over the next five years, it could balloon to cost us more than \$10 billion (IDRA, 2025; LBB, 2026).

To date, 76% of applications to the program are for students who have never been in public school (OSOD, 2026). Most applications have come from Texas metro areas, with Houston and the Dallas-Fort Worth area in the lead. The official in charge of the program, the Comptroller of Public Accounts, already expects to request additional state funds for the voucher program next year (Hancock, 2026a).

Despite relying on these taxpayer dollars, the program offers parents no clear way to know whether their children are being set up for success. Private schools that receive voucher dollars are not required to share academic results or offer transparency about what's taught and how students are treated. And private schools can still choose which students to admit. This lack of accountability is common in voucher systems nationwide, often with serious consequences for families (Ciletti, 2023).

(cont. on Page 6)

Vouchers aren't free money. They are public dollars repurposed. We all pay for it, whether we use them or not.

(My Child Is Starting Kindergarten. Texas's Voucher Program Worries Me., continued from Page 5)

Even before the voucher law took effect, school districts were already grappling with staff layoffs, cutting programs that families rely on like dual language education and, in some cases, like my son's district, deciding which schools can stay open at all (Velez, 2025; Baker Austin, 2025). Vouchers threaten to deepen this instability, raising real fears for families who can no longer be certain their neighborhood school will still exist next year.

Vouchers are marketed as a parent's "choice," but that choice comes with trade-offs. To receive a voucher, parents must acknowledge that the special education services guaranteed in public school no longer apply in private settings (NCLD, 2024). In other words, vouchers offer fewer student supports and fewer ways for parents to advocate if their child's needs change.

As my son begins public school, I want his teachers and classmates to have every resource they need to thrive: steady funding, enriching programs, and safe, supportive classrooms.

Vouchers may now be Texas law, but Texans still control what kind of education system we build. Our public schools are strong because communities care about them. It's up to us to keep them that way by staying informed about where tax dollars go, demanding transparency and urging lawmakers to protect funding for every public school student. The future of Texas depends on the quality and stability of the public schools we choose to sustain together.

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Georgia School Funding Gap Widens as State Shifts Costs to Local Districts
New IDRA Report Finds Wealthiest Districts Raise Thousands More per Student and Calls for Increased State Investment

Georgia increasingly passes the burden of education costs to local communities rather than closing gaps at the state level. The wealthiest districts can raise almost \$5,000 more per student in local revenue than lower wealth districts, according to a new report released by IDRA. Georgia's Quality Basic Education Formula Turns 40 – Closing the Gap or Passing the Buck? warns that property tax cut proposals being considered by the Georgia Assembly could deepen the gap between rich and poor school districts.

"The continued reliance on local property taxes for school funding creates a separate and unequal system for public education in Georgia," said IDRA Georgia advocacy director and report author Mikayla Arciaga, M.A.Ed. "The legislature should increase, not cut, funds for schools most neglected by decades of underfunding. All Georgia students should have access to high-quality education and the resources they need to succeed."

Georgia's 1985 school funding overhaul through the Quality Basic Education Act (QBE) was a step in the right direction to strengthen education and balance state and local responsibility for funding. But without continued state investment, it doesn't meet its actual goal of ensuring equity and adequacy for all Georgia public schools.

IDRA's study found:

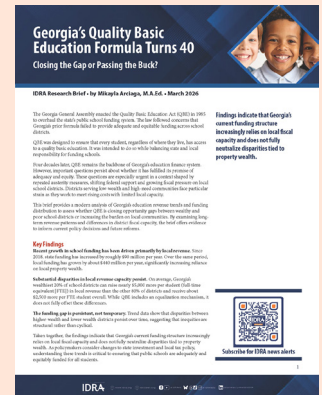
- Recent growth in school funding has been driven primarily by local revenue.
Substantial disparities in local revenue capacity continue.
The funding gap is persistent, not temporary.

On average, the wealthiest 20% of school districts can raise nearly \$5,000 more per student than the other 80% and receive about \$2,500 more per student overall.

The structure of QBE places significant financial responsibility on local districts. The state also mandates services and programming to meet student needs but does not fully fund their delivery.

IDRA calls on policymakers to correct decades of divestment and underfunding in Georgia public schools, increase state investments in schools most affected and expand the QBE formula to include funds for educating students living in poverty.

See IDRA's report: Georgia's Quality Basic Education Formula Turns 40 – Closing the Gap or Passing the Buck?
https://idra.news/GaQBEat40p



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Georgia Opts into Federal Voucher Program as Public Schools Face Funding Strain

IDRA Urges State Leaders to Recommit to Fully Funding Georgia's Public Schools Instead of Expanding Privatization

By Mikayla Arciaga, M.A.Ed.

On January 20, 2026, Gov. Kemp announced that Georgia will opt into a federal private school voucher program that provides tax credits to donors to voucher organizations in the state. He made this decision without public input or public consultation with the legislature.

It is deeply concerning and a violation of wisdom, justice and moderation at a moment when Georgia's public schools face growing fiscal and structural challenges.

The overwhelming majority of Georgians send their children to public schools, particularly schools serving rural communities, students with disabilities and students from low-income families.

Wise governance demands that we strengthen – not weaken – the institutions which serve most of our children. But voucher programs divert scarce public resources toward private schools that are not held to the same standards of transparency, accountability or nondiscrimination laws. This weakens the public education systems on which communities rely.

The federal voucher provides a dollar-for-dollar tax credit of up to \$1,700 per year to people who donate to scholarship-granting organizations, which then issue vouchers to individual families. This money would otherwise go to public schools that serve the vast majority of students.

Research estimates that the federal voucher could funnel away tens of billions of dollars each year from the public good to private institutions (Davis, 2025).

This is not a theoretical concern. Georgia's Qualified Education Expense Tax Credit Voucher program has been repeatedly criticized by the Department of Audits for failing to

adequately account for hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars (Griffin, 2021).

And the reporting requirements for the Special Needs Scholarship Voucher and the Georgia Promise Voucher are so minimal that meaningful evaluation or public accountability is impossible.

The governor's decision also comes amid growing fiscal uncertainty for Georgia's public education system. After decades of austerity cuts and stagnant funding, state divestment from our public schools has left many communities bearing more than their fair share of the cost.

Federal pandemic relief funds have expired, and additional federal education and social service cuts are under consideration. Many school districts are already preparing for budget shortfalls which will affect staffing levels, student support and classroom resources.

As the state continues to divest from public education, districts are increasingly reliant on local property wealth to fill funding gaps. The state is placing a heavier burden on communities with the least capacity to absorb it.

Moderation calls for responsible stewardship of public funds. Taxpayer dollars should not be directed to private systems that are not accountable to the public.

Justice requires restitution for the historic underfunding of our public schools and the shortcomings of existing school privatization schemes rather than diverting additional resources from public schools. Opting into the federal voucher program does nothing to address these structural challenges and will instead deepen inequities between communities.

Wisdom calls for stabilizing public schools and protecting essential services. Diverting public

funds to private vouchers under these conditions is not just misguided; it is irresponsible.

Public education is a public good. Every child deserves access to a well-resourced, fully funded public school, regardless of zip code, income, disability status or background.

Georgia's leaders should be guided by wisdom, justice and moderation to strengthen the public systems charged with serving all students, rather than fragmenting opportunity through privatization.

IDRA calls on state leaders to reverse course. Recommit to fully funding Georgia's public schools. Pursue policies that expand opportunity by investing in the systems that serve most children, not just a tiny few. Georgia deserves better.

Resources

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