

School Vouchers

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AAUW advocates opposition to the use of public funds for nonpublic elementary and secondary education and to charter schools that do not adhere to the same civil rights and accountability standards as required of other public schools.

High-quality public education is the foundation of a democratic society and the key to economic prosperity, college and career readiness, and gender equality. Open and nondiscriminatory in their acceptance of all students, American public schools are a unifying factor among the diverse range of students with or without disabilities, LGBTQ students, and students from different racial, ethnic, and religious groups in our society. Vouchers undermine education for all by diverting desperately needed resources away from the public school system to fund the education of a few students at private or religious schools that are not proven to improve academic achievement or adhere to students' civil rights.

Vouchers Weaken Public Education

School funding typically comes from a combination of three sources: local, state, and federal funds. Federal funds are targeted to closing achievement gaps in student populations, including for students with disabilities, low-income students, and minority students. There are no existing federal funds that can easily be turned into [universal vouchers](#) to pay private tuition for all students currently in public schools.

Though state and local funding for education varies greatly, state governments provide about [47%](#) of public education funding, with another 45% of funding coming from local governments. However, at least 29 states were [providing less funding](#) per student in the 2015 school year compared to 2008, before the recession took hold. Funding at the local level also decreased in 19 states over the same period. Though public education funding has improved in most states since 2015, some states have [continued to cut funding](#) as well as income tax rates, thus generating even less revenue to support their public school systems.

Given the severe education budget crisis at all levels, it is both impractical and unwise to gamble limited funds on vouchers for a few students. The government should use

these funds to make public schools stronger by supporting programs that have been shown to improve student outcomes, such as teacher training, smaller class sizes, expanded support services, and improved facilities. Diverting [critical resources](#) from public schools, which educate 90% of America's students, is not a fiscally sound investment.

Vouchers Do Not Improve Academic Achievement

Repeated studies of voucher programs show that vouchers do not result in better outcomes for students. Recent studies of both the [Louisiana](#) and [Ohio](#) voucher programs revealed that students who used vouchers actually performed worse on standardized tests than their peers who are not in the voucher programs. Repeated studies of the voucher programs in [Indiana](#), the [District of Columbia](#), and [Milwaukee](#) revealed similar findings: Students who are offered vouchers do not perform better in reading and math than those not in the programs.

These results should not be surprising because many voucher schools are permitted to take taxpayer money without implementing any requirements for teacher qualifications or student outcomes. Accreditation is also [optional](#) for private schools in most states, meaning taxpayer-funded vouchers are regularly used to pay for tuition at unaccredited schools. Further, some states do not even require private school teachers to hold [bachelor's degrees](#).

Many voucher schools also fail to offer participating students greater educational resources. A 2010 study of the District of Columbia voucher program, for example, found that students using vouchers were less likely to have access to key services such as ESL programs, learning supports, special education supports and services, and counselors than students who were not part of the [program](#). Because voucher schools do not ensure quality education for all students, it is a mistake to divert taxpayer funds to unaccountable schools.

Vouchers Do Not Offer Real Choice

Vouchers give a choice to private schools rather than to parents and students. Voucher programs are governed by different laws in different states, but most allow private schools to accept taxpayer dollars yet reject students with vouchers for a variety of reasons. A 2016 report conducted by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that, of all voucher programs across the country, only four required private schools to accept all students with vouchers, space permitting. All other [voucher programs](#) allowed private schools to deny students admission or grant preference for many reasons, including disciplinary history, academic achievement, and religious affiliation.

Students with disabilities are [systematically excluded](#) from voucher programs, as most voucher programs permit schools to discriminate in their admission policies. Private schools are [not required](#) to provide the same quality and quantity of services available to students with disabilities in public schools, including those mandated under each student's individualized [education plan](#).

Vouchers also [fail rural](#) students and families. The expense of running isolated religious or for-profit schools in less densely populated communities often outweighs any market-driven approach to education. For these communities, fully funded public schools are critical, since the local public schools may be rural students' only [option](#).

Vouchers fail students from middle-class and low-income families as well. Many voucher programs do not place a cap on private school tuition, meaning that a [voucher](#) may not cover the actual cost of attending private schools in the state.

Civil Rights Are Not Guaranteed at Voucher Schools

Many parents and even legislators fail to realize that private schools do not provide the same rights and protections to students as public schools, such as the protections in Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, Title IX, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Every Student Succeeds Act. For example, students in private voucher schools can be denied Title IX enforcement by the U.S. Department of Education and the federal courts even when schools fail to create climates safe from sexual harassment and assault, discriminate against pregnant and LGBTQ students, discriminate in hiring teachers, or limit or deny women and girls athletic opportunities. Students who attend private schools using vouchers are also

stripped of the First Amendment, due process, and other constitutional and statutory rights guaranteed to them in public schools.

Unfortunately, vouchers have a long history of facilitating discrimination and having discriminatory effects. Vouchers were one of the [strategies](#) states and local school districts used to maintain racial segregation in their schools in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court [Brown v. Board of Education](#) decision. Although vouchers based on the race of the students were found unconstitutional in the 1964 decision [Griffin v. County School Board](#), vouchers can still have discriminatory effects. For example, a 2017 [study](#) of Indiana's state school voucher program revealed that benefits increasingly served white students from middle-class families rather than low-income students whom the program was designed to support. That year, around 60% of school voucher recipients in Indiana were white, while only 12% of Black students received school vouchers.

Today, about 80% of schools using vouchers are [religiously affiliated](#). Most of these schools integrate religion throughout their curriculum—including ideology far outside the mainstream, such as creationism in lieu of evolution and controversial ideas about other religions, the role of women in society, gay rights, and more—and often require all students to receive religious instruction and attend religious [services](#). In other words, vouchers force Americans to pay taxes to support religion, which runs counter to the First Amendment's guarantee of religious liberty. In the 2002 [Zelman v. Simon-Harris](#) decision, however, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of vouchers to religious schools where "state aid reaches religious schools solely as a result of the numerous independent decisions of private individuals" and the program "does not have the purpose or effect of advancing or inhibiting religion."

Thirty-seven states have state constitutional provisions, called Blaine Amendments, that ban the expenditure of public money on religiously affiliated schools. In 2015, the Colorado Supreme Court struck down a voucher program that used taxpayer money to send children to religious schools because it conflicted with that state's [Blaine Amendment](#). The Colorado school district appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, though the case was sent back to the Colorado Supreme Court and ultimately dismissed.