

School vouchers are tax dollars paid directly to private schools as tuition for students who opt out of public schools. Public polling data reports that **70 percent of Americans and 61 percent of North Carolinians oppose school vouchers.**

### Concerns about Vouchers for Private Education:

- **Loss of funds for public schools** The loss of tax dollars may reduce academic programs and teaching staff at traditional public schools.
- **Student success** There is no evidence that private or religious schools offer a higher quality education for students than public schools.
- **Student safety** Private schools do not have to conduct background checks on employees and volunteers the way public schools do.
- **Financial accountability** Voucher programs divert tax dollars to largely unregulated private entities that run private schools. Taxpayers do not see how the money is used or who is spending it.
- **Academic accountability** Private schools do not have to hire licensed teachers, and are not subject to the academic standards imposed on public schools. North Carolina's law says schools "may not discriminate with respect to race, color, or national origin" but some private schools receiving voucher money require professions of faith to enroll.
- **Admissions** Private schools are not required to serve free/reduced lunch, offer transportation, or provide special education services—and they can select the students they admit.
- **Tuition Gap** Even with a taxpayer-funded subsidy, most middle class families cannot afford to pay the difference between the subsidy and the high cost of a private school education.
- **Enrollment** The vast majority of our students—about 1.5 million are educated in our public schools. Private schools educate fewer than 115,000 students.
- **Oversight** The use of public tax dollars to fund private school education demands careful monitoring to ensure standards for schools accepting voucher funds are met. The price to develop and administer

### North Carolina Opportunity Scholarships

The NC General Assembly created a voucher program called Opportunity Scholarships in 2013. The Opportunity Scholarship program awards up to \$4,200 per year for qualifying students to attend participating non-public schools. The state issued tax money to private schools for the first time for the 2014-15 school year. In 2016, the NCGA greatly expanded the program as part of the [budget passed in the short session](#). The budget raised the percentage of funding available to Kindergarten and 1st grade students, and it established an Opportunity Scholarship reserve fund to be augmented by \$10 million every year until 2027-28 when it will plateau at \$144.8 million in annual funding. Future legislatures cannot be compelled to provide this funding, yet it represents a commitment to dramatically expanding this program without reviewing academic outcomes for students or increasing accountability for the taxpayers who fund it.

In the 2015-2016 school year, 3,666 students attended 330 private [schools](#) at a cost of \$13.3 million. More than 275 of those schools are religious institutions that received [well over 90% of the total taxpayer dollars spent on vouchers](#), more than \$12 million. The largest cohort of Opportunity Scholarship recipients attended [a single religious school](#) in Fayetteville, with those 130 students making up two-thirds of its student population. That school alone received 3.9% of the voucher program's entire disbursement.

The [NC State Education Assistance Authority](#) administers NC's voucher program. Voucher can be used for "tuition and fees for books, transportation, equipment, or other items required" by the private school. Other provisions of the legislation include:

- Aggregated standardized test performance data of voucher recipients is not part of the public record and must only be reported if a private school has more than 25 students receiving vouchers.
- The only measure of student learning gains or losses required for voucher recipients is aggregated standardized test performance.
- Only the highest decision-making staff member at a participating private school is subject to a background check.
- A private school is only required to conduct a financial review if it receives more than \$300,000 in scholarship grants.

### **Qualification Criteria**

To qualify for a voucher, a student must be at least 5 years old, live in NC, and meet one of the following criteria:

- Be enrolled full-time in a public school.
- Received a voucher in the previous school year.
- Live in foster care or be an adopted child whose decree was entered not more than a year before applying for the grant.
- Be entering kindergarten or first grade.

In addition, the student must live in a household with an income level not in excess of 133% of the amount required for the student to qualify for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. A family of 4, for example, can't exceed \$44,955 to receive \$4,200 (the largest grant), or \$59,790 to get 90% of tuition or \$3,780, whichever is lower.

The NCSEAA relies on applicants to report all income. Only "a percentage" of applicants are "randomly selected to be verified, requiring families to provide documentation for items such as income, school enrollment, and household members." Meaning, only applicants selected for verification have to submit tax returns as proof of income.

### **Legal History of NC's Voucher Program**

- In December 2013, two lawsuits, each challenging the constitutionality of the voucher program, were filed. The NC Association of Educators and the NC Justice Center filed a suit on behalf of 25 plaintiffs from across the state. The NC School Boards Association filed the other lawsuit on behalf of four individual plaintiffs; 72 of North Carolina's 115 school districts have also adopted resolutions supporting the second suit.
- In August 2014, Judge Hobgood found school vouchers to be unconstitutional "beyond a reasonable doubt." Further, he stated: "The General Assembly fails the children of North Carolina when they are sent with public, taxpayer money to private schools that have no legal obligation to teach them anything."
- On July 23, 2015, the NC Supreme Court ruled in a rare partisan split that the voucher program is constitutional. Our press release read, "Today is a very sad day in the history of our state. Our long-standing tradition of commitment to excellence in public education has made North Carolina a jewel among southern states. We cannot fathom how this decision upholds the constitutional promise that all children receive a sound, basic education within the public school system. And we are deeply concerned as strong public schools are critical for growing our economy and maintaining the vitality of our communities."

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