

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 61% of Americans prefer a system that funds public schools. When asked if they would support a voucher that covered just half of private or religious school tuition, the number of parents who say they' would opt for a public school increases to 72%.

North Carolina Opportunity Scholarships

The North Carolina 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 nonpublic schools. The state issued tax money to private schools for the first time in the 2014-2015 school year. After a lawsuit, the NC Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the program in July 2015. 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 K-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 2017-18 school year, 7001 students attended 405 [private schools](#) at a cost of \$20.3 million. The largest cohort of Opportunity Scholarship recipients attended [a single religious school](#) in Fayetteville, with those 201 students making up more than half of its student population. The largest dollar amount, \$451,442, went to Liberty Christian Academy in Richlands, NC where 122 of the 145 students are voucher recipients. The 2018-2019 Budget Adjustments bill increased funding for the Opportunity Scholarship program from \$45 to \$55 million.

The [NC State Education Assistance Authority](#) administers NC's voucher program. Funding for the Program is contingent each year upon appropriations made available to the Authority by the General Assembly. The 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. It is only 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 an Opportunity Scholarship, a student must meet one of the following criteria:

- Was a full-time student attending a NC public school or Department of Defense school in North Carolina last spring semester.
- Received a voucher in the previous school year.
- Be entering kindergarten or first grade.

- Live in foster care or be an adopted child whose decree was entered not more than a year before applying for the grant.
- The student must also 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.

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 \$46,435 to receive \$4,200 (the largest grant), or \$61,759 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 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. The NC School Boards Association filed the other lawsuit on behalf of four individual plaintiffs; 72 of NC's 115 school districts 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." Many believe that this decision does not uphold North Carolina's constitutional promise that all children receive a sound, basic education within the public school system.

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 students are performing or how the money is spent.
- **Academic accountability** Private schools do not have to hire licensed teachers, and are not subject to the academic standards imposed on public schools.

- **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 1.45 million are educated in our public schools. [Private school enrollment](#) for the 2016-2017 term was 100,585 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 such standards is significant and is an additional cost to taxpayers.

Resources

Legislation enabling the Opportunity Scholarship Program:

<http://www.ncseaa.edu/documents/OSPStatute.pdf>

School Vouchers Don't Make The Grade (May 2003).

http://www.epi.org/publication/webfeatures_viewpoints_hl_testimony_20030509/

Vouches and the Future of Public Education: https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/vouchers-and-the-future-of-public-education/2012/06/05/gJQAZ3X6GV_blog.html?utm_term=.b84a6bbd5d6f

Diane Ravitch's Blog: New Study: Vouchers Enable Discrimination and Segregation (February 2017)

<http://nepc.colorado.edu/blog/new-study-vouchers>

School Vouchers in NC: A Report Issued by Children's Law Clinic: Duke Law School (March 2017):

“The First Three Years”: http://www.publicschoolsfirstnc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/School_Vouchers_NC.pdf

Current List of Participating NC Nonpublic Schools (March 2018): <https://www3.ncseaa.edu/cgi-bin/SCHOOLROSTER/NPS500.pgm>

Why School Vouchers Hurt Us: (February 2017):

https://www.opednews.com/Quicklink/IMPORTANT-Here-s-WHY-Scho-in-Best_Web_OpEds-Betsy-Devos_Diane-Ravitch_Education_Education-170201-723.html

NC Opportunity Scholarship Program Summary of Data: January 2018:

http://www.ncseaa.edu/documents/OPS_Summary_Data.pdf

Frequently Asked Questions: Charters, Vouchers, and Public Schools (August 2017).

<http://www.backpackfullofcash.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/backpack-faq.pdf>

Why Private School Vouchers Could Exacerbate School Segregation (December 2016)

(De <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/private-school-vouchers-exacerbate-school-segregation/>

School Vouchers: The Emerging Track Record. <http://www.nea.org/home/16970.htm>

Vouchers Do Not Improve Student Achievement (February 28, 2017).

<https://news.stanford.edu/2017/02/28/vouchers-not-improve-student-achievement-stanford-researcher-finds/>

More findings about school vouchers and test scores, and they are still negative: (July 13, 2017).

<https://www.brookings.edu/research/more-findings-about-school-vouchers-and-test-scores-and-they-are-still-negative/>

A Mixed Bag on Private School Vouchers (June 26, 2017). <https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2017-06-26/on-private-school-vouchers-a-mixed-bag-of-research>

School Vouchers and Race: It's Complicated (July 2017).

<https://tcf.org/content/commentary/school-vouchers-race-complicated/>

Five Talking Points on Vouchers: <http://www.nea.org/home/17011.htm>

America Needs Public School Choice, Not Private School Vouchers (March 2017):

<https://tcf.org/content/report/america-needs-public-school-choice-not-private-school-vouchers/>

Are Private School Voucher Programs an Effective School Choice Option? (May 2017):

<https://tcf.org/content/commentary/private-school-voucher-programs-effective-school-choice-option/>

What Do School Vouchers Have to Do With Protecting Bullied Students? (February 2018):

<https://www.publicschoolreview.com/blog/10-advantages-to-public-education>

The Public School Advantage: Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools (July 2013):

https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_public_school_advantage_why_public_schools_outperform_private_schools

Beware of School Voucher Doublespeak (May 2017): <http://neatoday.org/2017/05/26/beware-of-school-voucher-doublespeak/>

Expanding High-Quality Educational Options for All Students: How States Can Create a System of Schools Worth Choosing (December 2017): <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/expanding-high-quality-options-report>

Education for Sale? *School choice and the future of American education* (March 2017):

<https://www.thenation.com/article/can-the-education-system-survive-betsy-devoss-extreme-school-choice-agenda/>

The Opportunity Scholarship, Disabilities Grant, and Education Savings Account Programs (Comparison of three programs). http://www.ncseaa.edu/pdf/k12_Programs_Summary.pdf

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