



SCHOOL VOUCHERS



School vouchers, also referred to as opportunity scholarships, are state-funded scholarships that pay for students to attend private school rather than public school. Private schools must meet minimum standards established by legislatures in order to accept voucher recipients. Legislatures also set parameters for student eligibility that typically target subgroups of students. These can be low-income students that meet a specified income threshold, students attending chronically low performing schools, students with disabilities, or students in military families or foster care.

History

The practice of state support for private school education has existed in Maine and Vermont for nearly 140 years. They have ongoing programs that provide public funding to private schools for rural students who do not have a public school in close proximity to their home. However, it was economist Milton Friedman's 1955 paper, "[The Role of Government in Education](#)", that launched modern efforts to use public dollars to pay private school tuition in hopes that competition among schools will lead to increased student achievement and decreased education costs.

- In 1989, the Wisconsin legislature passed the nation's first modern school voucher program targeting students from low income households in the Milwaukee School District.
- In 2001, Florida enacted the John M. McKay Scholarships Program for Students with Disabilities becoming the first state to offer private school vouchers to students with disabilities.
- In 2004, the first federally funded and administered voucher program was enacted by Congress in Washington, D.C. It offered private school vouchers to low income students, giving priority to those attending low-performing public schools
- In 2007, the Utah legislature passed legislation creating the first statewide universal school voucher program, meaning it was available to any student in state with no limitations on student eligibility. A petition effort successfully placed the legislation on the state ballot for voter approval. In November 2007, the ballot measure was voted down and the new voucher program was never implemented. Utah's existing special needs voucher program was not affected by the vote.
- In 2011, Indiana created the nation's first state-wide school voucher program for low income students

Arguments For and Against

What the Proponents Say: Private school choice [proponents contend](#) that when parents can choose where to send their child to school, they will choose the highest performing options. Those schools performing poorly will be forced

to either improve or risk losing students and the funding tied to those students. While public school choice policies like charter schools serve a similar purpose, private schools have more flexibility in staffing, budgeting, curriculum, academic standards and accountability systems than even charter schools. This flexibility, [supporters argue](#), fosters the best environment for market competition and cost efficiency.

>**What the Opponents Say:** Opponents of private school choice raise a [number of concerns](#). They argue shifting a handful of students from a public school into private schools will not decrease what the public school must pay for teachers and facilities, but funding for those costs will decrease as students leave. Some also see government incentives to attend private religious schools as [violating the separation of church](#) and state. Others believe the positive effects of school competition on student achievement are overstated by proponents.

What the Research Says

When compared to similar public school students, voucher recipients have generally performed at the same level on reading and math assessments according to the [Center on Education Policy's](#) review of school voucher research, though some gains have been found among low income and minority students who receive vouchers.

Other research has found voucher recipients are more likely to graduate from higher school than their public school counterparts. School competition was also found to slightly improve student achievement in some Milwaukee schools that lost students to school vouchers and under [Florida's tax credit scholarship program](#), although other researchers have questioned the ability to tie these improvements to school vouchers rather than other school reforms.

What States Have Done

There are 13 states plus the District of Columbia and Douglas County School District in Colorado with school voucher programs. Of those, eight states offer vouchers to special needs students, four states plus D.C. offer them to low income students or students from failing schools, and two offer them to certain rural students. Louisiana and Ohio have programs for both low income and special needs students.

Compare how each state has approached their school voucher laws including which students qualify, how private schools are regulated, and the size of each state's voucher by visiting the [State-by-State Comparison of Voucher Laws](#) webpage.