



## Issue Brief – School Vouchers

---

### **Background**

A school voucher is a publicly funded credit or certificate whereby a student may be enrolled in a private school and apply the credit to tuition. Education savings accounts (ESA), which are similar to voucher programs, are used to provide financial support to qualifying parents who want to send their children to private school. Recipients can also choose not to use the funds for tuition at all, but instead, use them to pay for a number of products and services related to educating their children. Ultimately, the idea is to create a competitive marketplace where parents and students have a choice outside of the public-school system.

Perhaps no other myth is more misleading as the one claiming these programs empower parents to make meaningful choices about their children’s schooling. Private schools are the entities that truly get to choose. Private schools admit the students that they wish to accept - when, where, and how. Traditional public schools must serve all students regardless of disability and special education status, family income, language proficiency, or academic standing.

School voucher proponents continuously reference higher education in their arguments. There is a key flaw in their argument, however, as higher education and K-12 education serve two very different purposes. Higher education institutions, such as colleges and universities, allow students to specialize in certain areas and gain an in depth understanding about specific topics (i.e. majors and minors). By contrast, the purpose behind K-12 education is to ensure every child within Tennessee has a basic understanding of numerous subjects and can go on to succeed in college or the workforce. This idea is so important that it is ingrained in our state constitution. The General Assembly believed the best way to ensure all students have access to a free public education is to create local boards of education and provide for local control. This method puts parents, students, businesses, and other members of the local community in charge of their children’s education.

Voucher proponents argue that Tennessee relies on a ZIP code to determine a child’s access to education. The truth is, that in Tennessee, a **locally elected board of education** determines school zoning and which school a student will attend. This is the central concept of local control. Proponents of vouchers ignore the idea of local control in regards to how students are enrolled in public schools.

Over the years, proponents have indicated that there needs to be “school choice” for students. However, Tennessee school districts provide numerous public school choice options:

- District open enrollment in every school district;
- The ability to transfer to another school district;
- Charter schools;
- Magnet schools;
- Extensive early postsecondary options;
- Virtual schools;



- Academy options;
- Achievement School District; and
- Individualized Education Account Program.

Another common claim regarding vouchers is that they will result in savings for states and taxpayers because students will be attending a private school instead of a public school. In practice, this does not play out as school vouchers require states to fund both public and private school systems. Even voucher plans that allow school districts to retain some funding when students depart using a voucher can ultimately cost districts and the state because of the fixed costs associated with educating children (classroom teachers, utilities, etc.). Studies of existing school voucher programs indicate that students rarely transfer in significant numbers from a single grade at a single school. Most commonly, vouchers draw students from throughout the schools and districts creating little savings in the cost of operations and maintenance. Just because one or two students in a classroom leave to attend private schools does not mean that the classroom no longer needs a qualified teacher, facilities, utilities, and all other resources required for an effective learning environment. Tennessee has been on the forefront with education reform (e.g. Race to the Top, revamping tenure, eliminating collective bargaining, increasing standards, and increasing the rigor of curriculum). All of these changes need time to be implemented and diverting money to private schools will only cause these reforms to stall.

School voucher programs have historically lacked accountability. Tennessee has spent years and over \$500+ million in Federal Race to the Top funds, creating the national standard in accountability for public education. Vouchers for private schools completely abandon these efforts.

Another issue that Tennesseans face is that private schools and private school teachers are not held to the same high standards Tennessee requires of public schools and public school teachers. Public schools are governed by an elected board of education who must answer to the people, not private school administrators.

Ultimately, numerous studies have found no clear advantage in academic achievement for students attending private schools with vouchers. Not only do vouchers benefit a limited and select number of students, statistical studies and test scores have debunked this myth and shown that a student does not have greater academic success just because they attend a private school.

### **TSBA Position - OPPOSE**

TSBA opposes any legislation or other similar effort to create a voucher program in Tennessee that would divert money intended for public education to private schools or organizations.