

Community Letter Against Vouchers:

School vouchers are receiving a lot of publicity right now and I would encourage you to stay informed. The following are my observations. Being an educational issue I felt I should share some points that you may not hear or see in the media and you may then form your own opinion.

A parent should absolutely have the right to choose if their child attends a public school, charter school, private school, or home school. No government should dictate that decision. There are great private, public, and home school environments throughout the state. However, taxpayer money should come with equal accountability and transparency.

A group of politicians have unsuccessfully attempted for years to pass a bill that would allow public tax dollars to funnel into private schools without this transparency. Governor Greg Abbott has now announced that he will call a Special Session of the Texas Legislature in October for another attempt to pass a voucher bill.

Politicians no longer use the term “voucher” because they know Texans are not in favor of this scheme. They now use Education Savings Accounts (ESA), Parental Choice, Universal School Choice, and others to avoid drawing negative attention.

If vouchers are such a great idea, Austin politicians would not need to hold public school funding hostage, threaten other members of the legislature with removal from office, and then attempt to bring local pastors into the equation to make a religious issue out of a failed scheme.

- At the end of the regular session in May, the Texas House passed a bill that would have increased school funding and salaries to offset inflation. However, Governor Abbott has made it clear that he will not sign a bill to provide additional public school funding unless vouchers (aka, ESAs) are passed.
- The Governor is now threatening any member of the Texas Legislature that does not vote for his voucher plan that they will have a primary challenger and he will support their opponent.

- Governor Abbott has also taken the unprecedented step of self-proclaiming Sunday, October 15, 2023, as “School Choice Sunday” and is asking pastors to support vouchers during worship. This action shows desperation and has drawn criticism from faith leaders. Here is the link to an article on this situation.
<https://www.baptiststandard.com/opinion/editorials/religious-freedom-calls-for-rejecting-abbotts-ask/>

Also, consider that rural areas or other parts of the state that have no or very few private schools will be sending our tax money to offset suburban families who already send their children to private school. Every tax dollar that is spent on private school is a dollar that will not be spent on public education. Texas is currently 42nd in the nation in per-pupil spending.

This document is not an attack on a party or Governor Abbott, whom I have supported. I am providing information on a highly controversial scheme that is not good for Texas. State Representatives who support public education are under attack from Austin politicians to vote for a plan to hand money to parents who already send their children to private school. I strongly believe in equal accountability and transparency when it comes to our tax money. Send an email or make a phone call today to the Governor’s Office, your Senator, or State Representative’s office and let them know where you stand on this issue.

Politician soundbites for Vouchers:

“This is the civil rights issue of our time.”

This is an attempt to use less fortunate families in order to paint the narrative that economically disadvantaged students will be able to attend private schools. The reality is that if a family is economically disadvantaged, the \$8,000 voucher will not cover the \$10,613 state average for private school for one student.

This \$10,613 average sum does not include enrollment fees, application fees, student supplies, field trips, educational trips, testing fees, virtual class fees, athletic fees, uniform fees, breakfast, lunch, and transportation. Once all the fees are assessed, the economically disadvantaged families will not be able to afford private school for one child, much less for multiple children in a family, even with the state voucher.

Private schools will have the ability to raise their enrollment cost to whatever they choose. This will allow their current families to pay their normal annual fees, plus hand over the \$8,000 state taxpayer voucher. Under this plan, a private school with 350 students would bring in \$2,800,000 more in taxpayer revenue and that is without accepting a single new student. All the while, the economically disadvantaged students are still left out.

How many private schools are there in Texas that can check all of these boxes?

- Accept all students no matter disability, academic ability, discipline, etc.
- Will not dismiss a child due to negative issues
- Will not cost the parent out-of-pocket money for tuition or fees
- Provide transportation at no fee
- Provide meals at no fee for economically disadvantaged children

“Vouchers will allow the parent to choose the school that best fits their child.”

If the parent can afford to pay the additional costs of a private school and provide transportation, they can apply to a private school. However, the choice is solely up to the private school as to which students they accept, not the parent. If the child is not academically on grade level, has a disability, discipline issues, speaks a different language, has poor attendance, or is of another religion, the child will most likely not be admitted. Governor Abbott himself is quoted, “If a parent wants to take their child to private school x and private school x doesn’t want any part of it, that child will probably not be admitted into that private school.”

“Funding for education is at an all-time high in Texas.”

While this may be a true statement, the embarrassing fact is that Texas is 42nd in per-student spending in the nation and \$4,000 below the national average. Instead of throwing millions to a second education system without equal accountability or transparency, why don’t we properly fund the system we have? Every dollar spent on private school is a dollar withheld from the underfunded public school system.

“Competition makes public schools better.”

When public schools have thousands of laws, mandates, and unfunded mandates, while also taking all students, and private schools have no state laws or mandates and can accept only the students they choose - that is not competition. There cannot be two separate standards. Either

require any school that accepts tax money to have equal accountability and transparency or take away all accountability for private and public schools.

“I am not for vouchers but I do support ESAs.”

Political double talk and a false statement. An ESA is a voucher.

“School choice will increase teacher pay.”

A deceptive and false statement.

“State education money should follow the student.”

Politicians are well aware that school funding has always followed the student when they move or transfer to another public or charter school. This is another attempt to spread false information.

“Our schools are for education - NOT indoctrination.”

The Texas Legislature and the State Board of Education set the mandated curriculum for all public schools in the state. If there are individual teachers or campuses who are teaching outside of this curriculum, hold them accountable. But do not attempt to slander all of the thousands of teachers and campuses across the state for a very few who may not be following the state curriculum.

Most private schools have a theme or theology that is taught to all children who attend. As a private business this should be completely acceptable. However, once a private school accepts public taxpayer money, would this not be the definition of a government school “indoctrinating” children?

The following is a breakdown by religious affiliation of the top ten types of private schools in Texas in which public tax money would be funding to teach beliefs and doctrines.

Affiliation Number of Schools

1. Christian 404
2. Catholic 262
3. Episcopal 85
4. Baptist 139
5. Lutheran Missouri Synod 67
6. Methodist 45
7. Islamic 31
8. Jewish 22
9. Assembly of God 18
10. Church of Christ 18

“I support teachers and administrators should be putting more money in the classroom.”

Another attempt from politicians trying to gain the favor of teachers and divide teachers and administrators. Most school budgets are close to 80% in salaries. When you add in the contracted services, utilities, and other essentials, there is little discretionary funding each year. This is a smokescreen to divert attention from their desire to siphon tax money to private schools without accountability or transparency.

“The numbers don’t lie: a majority of Texans from rural, urban, and suburban communities support school choice.”

This is certainly a politician’s manipulation of surveys to get the results and soundbites they are looking to use. How the question is asked in a poll or on a ballot is a huge factor in the results.

If the question is, “Do you believe a parent should have the power to choose the school that is best for their child?,” very few people would say no because people believe in parental rights.

If the question is worded as, “Do you believe public tax money should pay for students to attend private school through vouchers and not have the equal accountability and transparency as

public schools?” you would get completely different results.

Below is a *very small* sampling of the differences in accountability for public and private schools who would be funded with taxpayer money.

Public Schools:

1. Must take all students who wish to enroll no matter their disability, discipline record, language, academic progress, financial status, or religion. Public schools by law cannot turn these children away.
2. May not dismiss students who have major discipline problems, excessive absences, or academic failures.
3. All students must take the state mandated STAAR Test. This is a controversial test and is only used in Texas. There is not a single college, military branch, or employer that uses the STAAR Test as a factor in entry or employment. Texas spends approximately \$90 million per year on this test.
4. Every school receives an A-F Rating from the Texas Education Agency based on the STAAR Test. Politicians claim a single letter grade helps parents understand how their local school is progressing. However, the Accountability Manual to explain what the letter grade means and how it was calculated is 200 pages.
5. Provide Free and Reduced breakfast and lunch to all students who qualify.
6. Provide transportation to and from school.
7. Curriculum is dictated by the Texas Legislature and the State Board of Education in Austin.
8. Mandated to have an annual independent financial audit. This audit must be presented in an open School Board meeting and submitted to the Texas Education Agency. TEA then uses this data to produce the Financial Integrity Reporting System of Texas to be presented to the public.
9. Have seven locally elected school board members who are residents and taxpayers.
10. Board meetings and information are subject to the Open Meetings Act.
11. Teachers and administrators must have a Bachelor's degree and pass all state mandated requirements to become a certified teacher.

12. Every campus must have a police officer, armed security guard, or armed staff member.

Private Schools who accept Voucher money:

1. Will continue to have stringent enrollment criteria and choose the students that “fit” their school mission. The term “parental choice” is a false and deceptive term. The parent will not be allowed to choose where their child attends. The private school will choose which children they want to accept. Many private schools require students to be “on grade level” or they will not be accepted.
2. May dismiss any student at any time for not meeting their standard.
3. Will not be required to take the STAAR Test.
4. Will not receive an A-F Rating.
5. Students will be responsible for providing or paying for their own breakfast and lunch.
6. Parents will be responsible for providing transportation.
7. Curriculum is strictly up to the private school
8. Financial audits are not mandatory or public record
9. Boards are appointed and not elected from local taxpayers
10. Have very limited transparency due to it being a private business
11. No degree or certification is required by the state for teachers or administrators
12. No state-mandated safety and security procedures or audits. No requirement for armed staff on each campus.

Review all the information and then decide personally where you stand on this issue. I would again encourage you to reach out to our elected officials and let them know how you feel about this topic.