

School Vouchers Defund and Destabilize Public Education



A resurgence of school voucher legislation at the state and federal levels is putting the promise of a free, high-quality education accessible to all learners at risk. Among the 50 million children that attend public schools, 2.7 million are Asian American and 182,000 students are Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander. Continued investments in public schools, where 81% of Asian American and 29% of Pacific Islander students attend is paramount.ⁱ

WHAT ARE SCHOOL VOUCHERS?

School vouchers are government funded payments that let families use public tax dollars to pay for private or religious education, homeschooling, and other private expenses. Often framed as a “scholarship,” by voucher proponents, vouchers divert public funding for public schools into private hands. School vouchers come in many forms, including—but not limited to—tax credits, tax deductions, scholarships, and education savings accounts (ESAs).

**2.7 Million
Asian American
Students Attend
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VOUCHERS ARE OFTEN USED TO UNDERMINE CIVIL RIGHTS PROTECTIONS, A CORNERSTONE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

School vouchers were first introduced by white supremacists to undermine the 1954 Brown v Board of Education Supreme Court decision which made racial segregation in public schools unlawful. In response, states that resisted racial integration created “state tuition grants” (or vouchers) that would allow families to use public dollars for private school tuition.ⁱⁱ These private schools refused to admit Black students, encouraging the growth of “segregation academies.”ⁱⁱⁱ Since the 1950s, these vouchers have been promoted to families as “school choice” options, just as they are being disguised today.

Public schools receiving federal funding are required to comply with federal civil rights laws. These laws were created to protect students from discrimination, including by race, color, religion, national origin, disability, or sex, and to ensure equal opportunity in access and quality of education.^{iv}

By contrast, private schools are not held accountable to federal civil rights laws, even when they receive public dollars through state-funded voucher programs. When private schools are allowed to receive public funds without being scrutinized under the same state and federal regulations, they can foster discrimination by refusing to enroll students based on racial or ethnic identity, counseling out students in poverty or students identifying as LGBTQ+, or failing to provide adequate services to English learners or students with disabilities.^{v, vi}



VOUCHERS DEFUND PUBLIC EDUCATION, FAILING TO SUPPORT STUDENTS IN ALREADY UNDERFUNDED SCHOOLS

Public schools receive an allocation of dollars based on the number of students enrolled (also called, “per pupil spending”). When a school voucher is used, the individual child’s allocation of public dollars is taken away from the public education system and put towards private or homeschool programs, instead of contributing to their assigned public school.^{vii} While funds follow the students, their civil rights and legal protections do not.

While vouchers are pitched as “school choice” to help students escape under-funded public schools for private education, data show that voucher programs do not meet the needs of these students.^{viii} Independent studies reveal that public school students who move to a voucher-accepting private school experience worse academic outcomes.^{ix, x, xi}

Moreover, the resources required for a student to attend private school are often not covered, such as the cost of uniforms, activity fees, lunch, and transportation. Combined with the cost of tuition rates, these additional expenses often exceed the amount of a school voucher. Data show that the overwhelming majority of school voucher recipients are white, wealthy, and were already attending private schools before receiving school vouchers. These are not students who needed a “choice” to improve their access to quality education.^{xii}

School Vouchers Defund and Destabilize Public Education, continued



VOUCHERS DRAIN FUNDING THAT COULD GO TOWARDS CRITICAL SUPPORT FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

Public schools serve 5.3 million English learner students (ELs). Of that population, Asian American students represent 9.7% (500,800 students) of the total EL student population. Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students represent 0.6% of the EL population.^{xiii} Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese, Hmong, and Urdu are among the top 10 most frequently spoken home languages of ELs.

When vouchers drain public schools of sufficient funding, schools are forced to conserve money by cutting positions or not hiring qualified ESOL-certified staff, providing experienced interpreters, and professional development that would equip educators to support students in their progress towards English language acquisition.



VOUCHERS DESTABILIZE FUNDING NEEDED FOR ADVANCED COURSEWORK OPTIONS

Advanced Placement (AP) courses prepare students for college classes, and passing AP exams allows students to get credit towards their future postsecondary coursework. However, offering a single AP course can cost a school anywhere from \$800 to \$11,650.^{xix} In 2025, U.S. students took 1.78 million AP exams.^{xx} Of those, 394,760 AP exams were taken by Asian American students; 3,826 AP exams were taken by Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students, reflecting the demand for AP classes. The threat of decreased funding due to vouchers can lead districts to limit the availability of AP classes, decreasing equitable access to college preparedness and college course credit for AA & NHPI students.



VOUCHERS UNDERMINE RURAL SCHOOLS

Of the 10 million U.S. students attending public schools in rural communities,^{xxi} over 196,000 of them are Asian American children, and 19,600 are Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander.^{xxii} Although vouchers can be used towards private school tuition, private schools are often located in larger cities, far from rural neighborhoods. In addition, tuition frequently exceeds the amount of school vouchers, making private education financially inaccessible for the low-income families that make up the majority of rural communities. Therefore, public schools are often the only option available for students in rural districts.

With lower enrollment than districts in larger cities, rural schools receive fewer local tax dollars and are at greater risk of facing budget cuts if vouchers are made available. These districts—especially in Arizona and West Virginia—have experienced an increased number of school closures as the use of school vouchers has increased.^{xxiii}



VOUCHERS FAIL TO MEET THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Six million students with disabilities receive special education and services at public schools. Asian Americans make up 8% (or 600,000) of U.S. students with disabilities and NHPIs make up 12% (or 900,000) of students with disabilities.^{xiv} Therefore, 20% of all public-school students receiving services related to disabilities are AA & NHPI, revealing our communities' significant need for continued funding to support students with disabilities in their educational journey.

With school voucher amounts differing from state to state, many students with disabilities would not receive enough to pay for private school tuition. As mentioned previously, public schools are subject to federal law, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).^{xv} This law protects the students' right to services and resources to ensure they have access to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). However, students with disabilities using vouchers at private school are not guaranteed the rights under IDEA, nor are they guaranteed funding for additional services related to their disabilities—or due process if the private school fails to provide FAPE.^{xvi, xvii, xviii}

Taxpayer dollars should not be spent in unregulated private education options that are not subject to the same federal protections and oversight, nor should they be spent in programs that can choose to turn away students with disabilities or refuse to provide the specialized education and services that students with disabilities need.

TAKE ACTION TO PROTECT PUBLIC SCHOOL FUNDING

Members of Congress

- Support S. 4297, the *Public Funds for Public Schools Act* and similar bills that protect school funding.^{xxiv}
- Send letters to Congress demanding that they repeal the national tax-credit voucher program.

Governors

- Urge governors to reject the Education Freedom Tax Credit, a federal voucher scheme designed to divert public funds into private schools. Taxpayers who donate up to \$1,700.00 to scholarship granting organizations (SGOs) can receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit. This federal program is estimated to cost \$50 billion dollars per year, nationwide—five times the total cost of state level voucher programs.^{xxv, xxvi}

State Lawmakers

- Protect and increase public school funding to ensure districts and schools can adequately staff, design, and implement educational programming for all students who are served by public schools. Additionally, update school funding budgets as necessary to meet the needs of historically underserved communities such as English learners, students with disabilities, and students in high poverty areas.^{xxvii, xxviii, xxix}
- Introduce legislation that would increase oversight and accountability for private schools that receive taxpayer funding through a voucher “scholarship.” For example, require private schools who accept vouchers to follow federal civil rights laws—including anti-discrimination laws—to ensure that students are entitled to legal protections wherever public funds are used.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- **National Education Association (NEA)**
<https://www.nea.org/resource-library/6-reasons-reject-federal-vouchers>
- **Public Funds for Public Schools**
<https://pfps.org/federal-voucher-program/>
- **National Conference of State Legislatures**
<https://www.ncsl.org/state-legislatures-news/details/new-tools-to-help-legislators-make-education-choice-policy-decisions>
- **National Center for Learning Disabilities**
Private School Vouchers, ESAs, and Tax Incentives, <https://nclld.org/?resources=1945>
- **Learning Policy Institute**
<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/federal-scholarship-tax-credit-tool>
- **EdTrust**
<https://edtrust.org/rti/advocacy-toolkit-to-fight-school-voucher-programs/>

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- Author note: The Department of Education (ED) website (<https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/civil-rights-laws/title-vi>) states, "Title VI's protections apply to all public elementary and secondary schools and colleges and universities—public or private—that receive federal financial assistance." Title VI protects students from discrimination — including on the basis of national origin — which extends to the right to language-accessible resources. However, there is no language in the Education Freedom Tax Credit Act (<https://www.congress.gov/119/bills/hr/1/BILLS-119hr1eas.pdf>), nor in the ED Fact Sheet (<https://www.ed.gov/media/document/education-freedom-tax-credit-fact-sheet-113147.pdf>) that indicates any enforcement on the part of the Office of Civil Rights to ensure private schools receiving federal vouchers comply with the same Title VI obligations that public schools have towards English learner students.
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