



**Testimony Before the House Ways and Means Committee
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Thank you for inviting me to offer testimony to the committee about the federal school voucher program. My name is Jessica Levin, and I am the Litigation Director at [Education Law Center](#), a non-profit organization that pursues justice and equity for public school students. I also direct [Public Funds Public Schools](#), a national campaign to ensure public funds for education are used to support and strengthen public schools, which are the cornerstone of our democracy.

It is our contention, and that of the great majority of public education supporters, that states will not benefit from opting in to the federal voucher program, as it is clear that voucher programs have numerous devastating effects. The best course of action to protect students, schools, communities, and taxpayers writ large, is for states to decline participation in this harmful program and concentrate on ensuring their public schools provide the high-quality educational opportunities that all students deserve and are guaranteed them by law.

Let me begin by saying that the program of tax credits for contributions to scholarship granting organizations (or “SGOs”), which was enacted as part of the federal budget bill last year, is certainly a school voucher program. Indeed, approximately twenty states use this tax credit method to fund existing state voucher programs. And the fact that public schools and public school students theoretically can receive some of the funding does not change the fact that

the vast majority of the funding can, and almost certainly will, go to private education providers.

There is a myth that the federal voucher program would not burden taxpayers and is “free money” for states. But vast empirical evidence demonstrates that voucher program costs increase over time, and the burden on taxpayers rises. A report examining voucher programs in seven states found that from fiscal years 2008 through 2019, each state dramatically increased expenditures of public funds on vouchers, with growth in Georgia reaching 883 percent. Florida’s now-universal voucher program cost almost \$4 billion in 2024-2025, and created budget crises that set off school closures and mass layoffs in districts across the state. The federal voucher program is predicted to cost the U.S. Treasury many billions of dollars each year, with the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy estimating that it could very well reach over \$50 billion annually. That is money that should be supporting the essential public goods the vast majority of Americans rely on, including public education.

As voucher programs cause funding losses for public schools, taxpayers feel the effects either as cuts to school programs and services or increased state and local taxes to fill school districts’ budget shortfalls—or both. In addition, the federal government has indicated that the voucher program will likely require the states themselves to take on the administrative and financial burdens of verifying information about SGOs. Moreover, the federal voucher program includes no meaningful accountability standards; like state voucher programs, it will invite waste, fraud, and abuse. Thus, far from claims that the federal voucher program represents “free money” that states cannot afford to pass up, in reality it comes at a great cost to public schools, students and families, and taxpayers.

Like everyone interested in the future of education in this state and across the country, we are awaiting regulations from the federal government that may flesh out details of the voucher

program. But all indications so far, including documents issued by the federal government when requesting initial public comments on the program, point to the fact that individual states will likely not be able to tailor the program to ensure meaningful support for public school students or high-need subgroups, to focus the voucher funds on public education, or to safeguard students' rights. The recourse for protecting public schools and students is to not opt in to the federal voucher program.

Because so many states have been operating voucher programs for years, we know the range of devastating effects on students, public schools, and states—and there is no reason to think that the federal program will be any less harmful. There is a large and mounting body of data and research showing that vouchers divert public funds away from the public schools that welcome all students to private entities that don't produce better educational outcomes, have very little accountability to the public, and often blatantly discriminate. Public school students then face the loss of critical educational resources, while states and their taxpayers face ever-increasing costs.

Public schools receive funding largely based on the number of students they enroll. When students take vouchers and exit their local districts to attend private school, public school funding decreases, but fixed costs remain, leaving students in those schools with fewer resources and educational opportunities. This may include reduced teachers and staff, increased class sizes, and cuts to essential programs and services. In some cases, public schools are even forced to close altogether as a result of funding cuts due to voucher programs. What's more, because private schools often discriminate against higher need, more costly-to-educate students, these students become concentrated in public schools with fewer resources available to serve them.

Of particular concern for Vermont is the danger that vouchers pose to rural public schools. Rural districts can't take advantage of the same economies of scale as denser, more populated districts, and they have fewer resources to pay for fixed education costs. For example, one study found that the per-pupil transportation expenditure in a rural district is nearly double that of an urban district and 50% higher than that of a suburban district. Thus, even a fairly small loss of enrollment and funding can easily overwhelm a rural school district, leading to cuts in programs and services, and even school closures. Such effects are proliferating in states with broad voucher programs and significant rural populations, such as Arizona and West Virginia.

In rural areas, school closures mean longer commutes for students, disruptions in learning and in relationships between students and educators, and reduced involvement in afterschool activities. Moreover, public schools are often the backbone of rural communities, playing a pivotal role in social and economic activities. When money is diverted from them due to voucher programs, public schools have fewer resources to provide community members with crucial services such as healthcare and food. And because schools are often a main employer in rural areas, school closures can trigger unemployment, as well as a loss of civic and social opportunities. Vouchers' negative effects on rural schools can impact the stability and wellbeing of the entire community.

Despite claims to the contrary, vouchers are not truly a tool to increase educational access and opportunity. Vouchers frequently don't come close to covering the full cost of private school tuition, let alone other essentials that are provided for free in public schools. Data from multiple states shows the majority of vouchers are used by more affluent families who were already sending their children to private schools, and not the low-income families they purport to target. For example, in New Hampshire, it was reported in 2022 that 89% of voucher students had never

attended public school. The federal voucher program has no prior public school enrollment requirement and is open to families earning up to 300% of the area median gross income; in some places, that's close to half a million dollars a year. This program will not actually provide opportunities that would otherwise be out of reach. In reality, it is a subsidy for the wealthy and those already in private schools.

But vouchers don't even help the students who use them—in fact, those students suffer several harms. First, the data show that academic outcomes for voucher students are dismal. Study after study in places like Louisiana, Indiana, and Ohio demonstrate that students using vouchers perform worse in subjects such as reading and math when compared to their prior achievement or to their peers who remain in public schools. Seven of nine large-scale studies conducted between 2015 and 2019, some spearheaded by voucher advocates, found detrimental effects from voucher programs, while the remaining two showed no statistically significant effects. And the federal voucher program is even more extreme than many state voucher programs in that it is completely devoid of curriculum requirements or other quality standards. Professor Josh Cowen of Michigan State University has explained that the negative educational effects of voucher programs are “on par with what the COVID-19 pandemic did to test scores, and larger than Hurricane Katrina's impacts on academics in New Orleans.” Conversely, a body of research conducted nationwide over many decades provides compelling evidence that increased public school spending leads to improved student outcomes.

Second, students who take a voucher to attend a private school—particularly LGBTQ+ students, students of various religious faiths, and others—risk losing civil rights protections that they are guaranteed in public schools. Unfortunately, many private schools discriminate in policy or practice. And under the federal voucher program, the organizations granting vouchers can also

discriminate against students (even those seeking a voucher for public education expenses), creating two layers of potential exclusion for vulnerable students.

Finally, vouchers harm students with disabilities, who lose most of their legal rights under special education and disability laws when they use vouchers to attend private school. Voucher students with disabilities have no right to the specific programs and services they need to make educational progress, and they lose IDEA and Section 504 protections against unfair discipline and segregation from non-disabled peers. And parents lose their rights to receive notification, provide input, and seek judicial remedies regarding their child's special education. Parents are often not made aware of the loss of these rights; a seminal GAO report found that 83% of those using vouchers specifically for students with disabilities were in a program that provided either no information or misinformation about changes in IDEA rights.

For all these reasons, states should not opt in to the federal voucher program. Like all private education vouchers, the federal voucher program is part of a broader assault on public education and an effort to privatize this keystone common good underpinning American democracy. State and federal efforts must instead continue to support and adequately resource public schools, which serve the vast majority of students, and ensure these schools provide a high quality, equitable, and non-discriminatory education that is open to all children.

For more information on the dangerous effects of private school voucher programs, I encourage you to visit the Public Funds Public Schools website at pfps.org. Thank you, and I welcome your questions.