



# ATPE Input to Public Education Committee

## Regarding Taxpayer Funded Vouchers

Aug. 12, 2024

The **Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE)** appreciates this opportunity to offer written input to the House Committee on Public Education concerning the interim charge on educational opportunity, which asks:

“Consider issues and matters to increase educational opportunities in Texas to ensure that students and families have increased options to attend a high-quality school, regardless of circumstance. Evaluate the use of education savings accounts in other states and make recommendations for a Texas program, including suggestions on eligibility and prioritization of applicants.”

**ATPE agrees it is critical that students and families have options to attend a high-quality school, regardless of circumstance.** A student population as geographically and demographically diverse as Texas cannot be served by a one-size-fits-all education system, and thankfully our constitutionally mandated public education system is not. A high-quality educational option must be: 1) Representative of and responsive to the needs of local communities; 2) Accountable for academic performance; and 3) Transparent and accountable to the taxpayers who foot the bill. Education savings account vouchers fail on each of these fronts.

### 1. REPRESENTATIVE

Independent School Districts exist under the Texas Education Code for the explicit purpose of empowering local parents and taxpayers to elect school leaders from among the community, oversee personnel issues, ensure curriculum matches local community standards while also covering the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), select instructional materials with guidance from the elected State Board of Education (SBOE), and set local tax policies, among other things. School districts must hold open meetings, hear public testimony, conduct public elections, and comply with public information laws that compel the release of government records. Vouchers would fund private schools, which are privately controlled and allowed to operate without regard to accepted community standards. Private schools may hire uncertified teachers and teach curriculum oppositional to community values and the TEKS without parental knowledge. **Unlike ISDs, there are no required mechanisms for parents to participate in leadership decisions, verify curriculum, protest policies, or obtain records.**

### 2. ACADEMICALLY ACCOUNTABLE

Independent longitudinal research on large scale programs in other states indicates students who took a voucher and left public school had test scores drop between -0.15 and -0.50 standard deviations. Vouchers in Louisiana and Ohio caused almost twice the academic loss as the COVID-19 pandemic. In the cases when students return to public schools, test scores are shown to improve. Compounding this problem, private schools in Texas are not required to administer state tests nor are they required to submit data on students' academic success. Public school districts and campuses receive A-F accountability ratings based on student performance on the statewide STAAR assessment, which—despite its many shortcomings—serves as a common yardstick for measuring performance. ESA vouchers would award taxpayer dollars to private schools without a required metric for tracking students' academic performance or holding private schools to the same academic standards. **Parents, tax payers and policy makers instead surrender their ability to know whether students are receiving a rigorous education that adequately prepares them for college, the military, or the workforce.**

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*The Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE) has been a strong voice for Texas educators since 1980. It is the largest educator association in Texas and one of the largest independent, nonunion educator associations in the United States. With its strong collaborative philosophy, ATPE speaks for classroom teachers, administrators, future, retired and para-educators and works to create better opportunities for more than 5 million public schoolchildren.*

### 3. ACCOUNTABLE TO TAXPAYERS

**In states that have ESA vouchers, the majority of participating students were already enrolled in private schools prior to receiving a taxpayer funded voucher.** Between 70% and 80% of voucher students in states such as Arizona, Missouri, and Wisconsin, as well as 9 out of 10 students in New Hampshire, were already enrolled in private school. This data categorically shows that instead of shifting *enrollment* from public schools to private schools, vouchers primarily shift state *funding*. This shift decreases the state resources available to the vast majority of students who remain in the public school system and introduces fiscal stresses that impact the entire state budget, as well as shifts more of the burden to funding public schools to local property taxpayers. Arizona Governor Katie Hobbs has acknowledged that vouchers may cost taxpayers more than \$943 million in 2024, potentially resulting in a budget shortfall for the state. Furthermore, states that have implemented ESA vouchers have discovered evidence of fraud and waste, such as parents buying kayaks instead of curriculum with taxpayer dollars. By contrast, public schools are held to strict standards under the School Financial Integrity Rating System of Texas (FIRST). Failure to meet financial accountability standards may result in severe sanctions up to and including district takeover by the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

#### **WHEN PROVIDED WITH AN UNDERSTANDING OF HOW THEY WORK, TEXANS DO NOT WANT VOUCHERS**

The Texas Hispanic Policy Foundation released their study on Texas voter opinions on border security, school vouchers, and abortion in April 2024. According to the poll, 57% of respondents oppose school vouchers. Additionally, legislation that would use tax dollars to provide school vouchers to all Texas parents is:

- **Opposed** by 57% of likely voters and supported by 36%
- **Opposed** by 68% of African-American, 58% of Hispanic, and 55% of White, non-Hispanic respondents
- **Opposed** by 60% of women and 54% of men
- **Opposed** by a majority of urban (58%), suburban (58%), and rural (57%) county residents

#### **IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS MUST SERVE ALL STUDENTS**

Texas students, families, and taxpayers already have a framework for ensuring representative, academically accountable, and financially responsible local educational options. Public school districts and campuses face many challenges, as do private schools. **The key distinction is that the public school system is thoughtfully designed to ensure schools receiving public funding must answer to the students, families, and taxpayers they serve.** Efforts to increase the options available to Texas students must operate within this framework.

Public schools have made significant strides in expanding and improving their offerings, making them a more attractive choice for many families. This is particularly evident in rural areas and among students who need special education services, which are guaranteed free-of-charge to public school students. Public schools are mandated by law to provide special education services tailored to the individual needs of students. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires public schools to offer a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to all students with disabilities. This ensures that students receive the support and resources they need to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. When a student moves to a private school, the student and parents lose all of their federal rights, and private schools often do not educate children with significant needs or behavioral issues.

Public schools remain the most accessible option to families in rural areas. Unlike private schools, which may be located far from rural communities, public schools are situated within the community, providing free transportation and ensuring that all students have access to education despite the distance of their commute. Public schools are the heart of our communities and often the largest employer in the area.

For these reasons and many more, **ATPE urges the committee to focus efforts on increasing educational opportunities within the public school system rather than diverting taxpayer resources to private schools without any transparency or accountability to the students, families, and taxpayers they serve.** For additional information, contact ATPE Governmental Relations at (800) 777-2873 or [government@atpe.org](mailto:government@atpe.org).

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