



The ABCs of N.C. School Vouchers

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A is for Accountability — to No One. NC's school voucher program is a black box, by design. Taxpayers have no idea how funding is being spent, what is being purchased, what students are being taught, and neither financial audits nor any test scores are reported to the public. In fact, private schools do not even meet reasonable standards for background checks; they are only required to have ONE staff person pass a criminal background check. In public schools ALL staff must pass a criminal background check.

B is for Bankrupting NC's Budget. Projections indicate that NC could soon be sending nearly \$500 million annually to private school vouchers, spending about \$5 billion on vouchers by 2032-33. Taxpayers should not have to fund a separate private system while our public schools are struggling from over a decade of underfunding and disruptions caused by the pandemic. If we want to give every child an excellent education, private school vouchers are the worst choice. Decades of research supports the community value of fully funding public schools and successful practices.

C is for Coupons for the Wealthy. Over half of school vouchers applications came from families making well above the median family income in NC, and many are from families making more than a quarter of a million dollars per year. Now, these wealthy families can use a school voucher as a coupon to defray these costs while public schools are struggling to cover costs of providing a basic free public education.

D is for Discrimination. Private schools can pick and choose their students using public tax dollars. They can discriminate against students with special needs, English Language Learners, LGBTQ+ students and families, and families with different religious beliefs. Most of the schools receiving vouchers in NC are religious schools who screen applicants based on religion. This completely undermines the separation of church and state needed to protect the religious freedom of students and keep specific religious viewpoints from being used to favor or harm students. Taxpayers should not fund schools that promote religious beliefs or church programs.

E is for Easy Money. Private schools only have to meet a few, modest requirements to receive vouchers. They only have to provide a tuition schedule, do a criminal background check on the school's top official, do an annual audit, and give students a nationally standardized exam of the school's choice. Test results and financial information are not public records. Compare this to public schools where all financial records are public and there are many academic and safety standards in place.

F is for Fraud. Data from last year revealed that the existing voucher program lacks adequate oversight and is potentially riven with fraud. Two agencies that oversee private schools and the school voucher program found numerous cases where schools received more vouchers than they had students. The lack of adequate oversight is concerning as lawmakers are getting ready to spend half a billion dollars a year on private schools.

G is for Gutting Public School Funding. Our public schools are facing budget cuts as they struggle to recover from the pandemic and their federal relief funding ends. Instead of taking money from these schools and funding private schools, we need meaningful investments in educator pay and training, wraparound services, targeted tutoring and other efforts to support these schools.

H is for a History of Hurting. School vouchers (aka "choice") have a history rooted in racism that led to inequity, segregation and discrimination. Today, voucher programs continue to perpetuate school segregation, systemic inequities, and a worsening opportunity gap for many vulnerable children. Universal voucher programs in other states have been shown to increasingly benefit higher-income white students, many of whom are already in private schools, while diverting funding from the students who remain in public schools.

I is for If. If private schools take public tax dollars, they should hire qualified teachers, provide meals and transportation, admit all students, and provide services for disabled students. Private schools taking our public tax dollars should expect the same scrutiny that public schools face over what they teach, how they spend our money



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and how well they do both. Private schools should follow the same regulations that public schools do that protect students, their families, and our taxpayers.

J is for Justifying Choice. Voucher supporters claim it's about choice but there are many nationally acclaimed public schools of choice, and there could be even more choice offerings with better financial support from the state. Vouchers fund a program where schools choose their students. They do not have admission or retention requirements like public schools and "choose" who they want to educate. Our public schools are not perfect, but instead of giving tax dollars to school vouchers, NC should be investing public money to improve public schools.

K is for Keeping Public Dollars in Public Schools. Funding public schools has a documented large and reliable return on investment while school voucher programs have been shown to devastate academic performance, especially in math. Our legislative leaders should keep public funds in public schools and support successful programs. Public funds should not be used for programs that have been utter failures in other states and harm the very students the programs are supposed to help.

L is for Leandro. First filed in 1994, for the past thirty years, the Leandro case has represented North Carolina's failure to adequately provide a sound, basic education to all students in the state. Legislative leaders are still fighting this obligation, even after a 2022 NC Supreme Court ruling that they must allocate the funds. At the same time, the millions and millions spent on school vouchers take even more funding away from the public schools that have a documented need.

M is for Marketing. In the 2023 budget, lawmakers earmarked \$1 Million annually to market the voucher programs. In previous years, the marketing budget was \$500,000 annually, paid to a non-profit to promote vouchers and help people apply. Of course, applications increased. Before the huge marketing push, the voucher program unspent funds each year. However, vouchers are not about real competition or they would not be exempt from state testing requirements, the number of hours spent on academic instruction, background checks for staff, and teaching credentials for their teachers.

N is for No evidence. There is no evidence that school vouchers increase student academic achievement, provide true choice for low income students, are cost-effective, or prepare our children for career and college. On the other hand, there is national data showing the negative impacts of vouchers on children, our economy, and our democracy while they strip public schools of badly needed funds.

O is for Overwhelmingly negative impact of vouchers on students who use them to leave public schools. Where data exists to compare academic performance of students who use vouchers to the academic performance of students who stay in public school, results show huge declines for voucher students, especially in math. The declines in some states are worse than COVID declines. And the negative impact persists for years.

P is for Public. Public money belongs in public schools. Every dollar that goes to private schools could be used to strengthen our public schools. These dollars could be used to enhance our special education programs, pay our educators better, increase training for teachers, provide schools and students with better broadband and computers, fund school lunches for all, expand NC Pre-k, and replace aging buildings.

Q is for Quality. North Carolina's voucher program completely abandons quality controls. Private schools are not required to teach the state-adopted content standards and their teachers do not have to be credentialed, have a college degree or pass a criminal background check.

R is for Runaway spending on vouchers. The money allocated to the private school voucher jeopardizes other services and programs for our public schools. Research is mounting on the overall failure of vouchers. Spending money on private schools drains the education budget, exacerbates segregation, undermines our constitutional promise to provide a free, high-quality education to all, and children are not learning more.



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S is for School privatization. The school privatization movement is driven by billionaires who promote vouchers and other programs that damage public schools. These wealthy promoters want to destroy public institutions because they know an educated citizenry will resist efforts to overturn our democratic institutions. One billionaire from Pennsylvania gave the Texas governor \$6 million to help elect pro-voucher candidates.

T is for Taxpayers. Having taxpayers fund private schools was first pitched in the civil rights era as a way for parents to avoid integrated schools. Then it was rebranded as school choice. Either way, it means taxpayer dollars are funding discriminatory private schools that have no accountability and no public transparency. Allowing our children to be passed on to private schools with no accountability and no public vetting fails our most vulnerable children and neglects our legal and ethical obligations.

U is for Universal school vouchers. Universal school voucher programs allow any family, regardless of income, to receive taxpayer funds. Universal programs also make voucher funds available to all students regardless of whether they have ever attended a public school. These programs siphon tax dollars from public schools that need funding to wealthy families that already have abundant resources. They are too expensive, they lack transparency and accountability, and they shortchange students and taxpayers.

V is for Voucher cost. The school voucher programs' skyrocketing costs divert funding not only from public schools, but also from other critical public services needed all across the state. North Carolina's small, rural low-income counties, which already struggle to provide services, will suffer the most.

W is for Welfare for the Wealthy. North Carolina's universal voucher program will send taxpayer dollars to families making \$250,000/year and more. Most of these wealthy voucher applicants already send their children to private school and have no need for state support. Why are our precious tax dollars going to families that make nearly 4 times the median income in North Carolina?

X is for eXtraordinary double-standard. It's wrong. The double standard should end. Apply all public school rules to private schools. The North Carolina legislature closely monitors and regulates public schools to ensure responsible use of tax dollars and an ability to monitor safety standards, teacher quality, student learning and outcomes, and appropriate public involvement. These important regulations and policies do not apply to private schools that receive tax dollars.

Y is for YES to fully funding our public schools. Say YES to ending universal vouchers! Say YES to keeping public dollars in public schools. Say YES to paying our educators better, expanding NC Pre-K, and fully funding Leandro!

Z is for Zero educational standards. The public has no insight or voice in these decisions even when taxpayer dollars fund the school. Every private school in North Carolina gets to choose the education qualifications of its staff, what curriculum to teach (or not to teach at all), what nationally standardized tests to administer, and in the case of the high school test, what score meets graduation standards.

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