Arizona governor signs universal school voucher program into law

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On July 7, Republican Governor Doug Ducey signed into law an amended expansion to "The Empowerment Scholarship Account" (ESA) program, to provide public funding via vouchers for private education, for which eligibility would extend to all 1.1 million K-12 students in the state.

The legislation significantly expands the scope of the original ESA legislation, which was first made into state law in 2011. Currently, around 11,800 students are enrolled in the voucher program. The original ESA program included only students with parents in the military, or who are wards under the state's foster care program, children with disabilities, and students who reside on Native American reservations.

The new law makes Arizona's ESA program the largest school voucher program in the country. Ducey signed the bill within days of the US Supreme Court ruling that allows state funding to be used for parochial schools.

The new law will provide $7,000 per student per year for parents who opt out of public school, for expenses incurred for private schools, also including home schooling and religious schools. The legislation contains limited provisions for oversight concerning the distribution of voucher funding, and almost no accountability over private schools who receive the funds.

On the same day, Ducey also signed legislation that lowers academic requirements for educators. Under this provision, teachers are not required to hold a degree. The prospective teacher need only be enrolled in an academic program to begin teaching in the public school system.

Notably, in 2017, a similar universal voucher bill passed in the legislature, but was defeated after a ballot referendum in 2018. The nearly 2-1 rejection of the voucher bill demonstrated the massive popular opposition to the attack on public education.

The Arizona public school system is one of the most woefully underfunded in the country, ranking near the bottom in per-pupil spending, with more than $1.1 billion having been cut over the last decade. Arizona educators are among the lowest paid in the nation. To add insult to injury, the state government forced schools open during the ongoing pandemic in 2021, which has exacerbated the crisis afflicting teachers and students alike.

Governor Ducey celebrated the legislation in a statement to the media: "This is a monumental moment for all of Arizona's students. Our kids will no longer be locked in under-performing schools. With this legislation, Arizona cements itself as the top state for school choice and as the first state in the nation to offer all families the option to choose the school setting that works best for them."

Various far-right and anti-public-education groups around the country have lauded the bill's passage, making clear that Arizona's universal school voucher program is a bellwether for the rest of the country.

Christopher Rufo of the right-wing Manhattan Institute think tank tweeted, "Gov. @DougDucey is poised to sign the first universal school choice legislation in the nation, which will give every family in Arizona $7,000 per child to attend any school of their choice. Every red state in the country should follow his lead."

Betsy DeVos, former Trump Administration Education Secretary and anti-public school advocate, tweeted, "A major victory for kids and families in Arizona."

In Arizona, the Goldwater Institute, named after the right wing Arizona senator and 1964 Republican

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presidential candidate, Barry Goldwater, which played a role in the development of the voucher program, declared the bill's passage "a major victory for families wary of a one-size-fits-all approach to education."

The coded language of all these groups—"school choice," giving "options" to kids and families, opposing "one size fits all"—is an effort to give a progressive-sounding cover to a frontal assault on one of the most important social and democratic rights of the working class, won over more than a century of struggle: the right to a free public education for their children.

Both vouchers and budget austerity have the same purpose, to shift the burden of paying for school costs from the government to the individual family.

The Arizona Democratic Party and its satellite organizations have offered nothing more than a tepid response to the passage of the expanded voucher bill.

Public education advocate group Save Our Schools Arizona (SOSAZ) told the media they plan to stop the voucher program by gaining the required 118,823 signatures necessary before the deadline of September 24. If successful, the effort would postpone the legislation going into effect until 2024, when it can be put up as a ballot referendum.

Beth Lewis, the director of SOSAZ, called the bill "a potential nail in the coffin of public education in Arizona."

Former Democratic Arizona House Representative Diego Rodriguez tweeted after the bill's passage: "The Republican universal voucher system is designed to kill public education."

The Arizona Educators United (AEU), the pressure group created in the wake of the teachers' strike in 2018, has largely thrown its efforts to the campaign for the ballot referendum organized by SOSAZ and the Arizona Education Association (AEA).

Democratic lawmakers in Arizona and their allies on the national stage have attempted to portray the assault on public education in the state as the sole product of the Republican Party.

In fact, the Democratic Party, along with the teachers unions, together with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left organizations, have aided and abetted the Republicans in carrying out a multi-decade assault on public education and the social position of educators and students.

The WSWS exposed these treacherous elements when Arizona teachers organized a strike outside of any union apparatus in April 2018 as part of a nationwide teachers strike wave, following in the steps of statewide teachers strikes in West Virginia and Oklahoma. The Arizona Educators United (AEU) and the National Educators United (NEU), both led by Arizona educator and DSA leading member Rebecca Garelli, conspired with American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten and state Democrats to strangle the strike before educators could win their demands for higher pay and larger funding for schools.

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