

# The privatization of public education in the US is accelerating backed by billionaires including Betsy DeVos

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The privatization of K-12 public education in the United States is accelerating. In 2023, 14 states have passed bills either establishing privatization schemes (euphemistically referred to as “school choice”) or expanding existing ones. Overall, 42 states have introduced “school choice” bills this year.

So far this year Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Oklahoma and Utah have passed legislation making school vouchers available to all or nearly all students, regardless of family income or current private school attendance status, joining existing universal programs in Arizona and West Virginia.

Eight other states have passed laws in 2023 increasing the number of students eligible to use public funds for private education: Alabama, Idaho, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Tennessee and Wyoming. Wisconsin and North Carolina are also poised to soon pass large expansions of their already-existing programs.

While privatization schemes have been around for years, they were generally restricted to students from low-income households and in low performing schools. Under the new privatization efforts, all or nearly all students, even those already attending private schools and those from wealthy families can access public funds to attend private schools.

“Private school choice is not a new thing, but what we’re seeing now is very new,” Bella DiMarco, a policy analyst at FutureEd, told *Education Week* “This is really the universal year.”

The new laws amount to a direct transfer of public funds to the super wealthy to continue to send their children to elite private institutions. To take one example, the Arizona education department reported

that in 2022, 75 percent of students applying for vouchers had never attended public schools.

Those using vouchers also tend to be from wealthy families. According to *K-12 Dive*, more than half of school privatization tax credits in Arizona, Louisiana and Virginia go to families with incomes over \$200,000.

“School choice” programs also decimate funding for public education. A recent analysis by the non-profit Public Funds Public Schools examined voucher programs in seven states and found that in six of them, investment in public schools fell as voucher spending increased.

In Florida, between 2008 and 2019, state spending on three tax credit or voucher programs increased by 313 percent. During the same period, per-pupil funding for public education decreased by 12 percent, from \$9,799 in 2008 to \$8,628 in 2019. On average, in all other states, per-pupil spending increased by 9.6 percent during this time.

Voucher programs do not improve educational outcomes for students. Numerous studies have shown that the large majority of charter schools and private institutions receiving vouchers perform worse than public schools. Academic studies on voucher programs in Washington D.C., Indiana, Louisiana and Ohio showed drops in standardized test scores larger than Hurricane Katrina’s devastating impact on public schools in New Orleans in 2005.

In the typical voucher scheme, students receive, at most, the state equivalent of per pupil funding for education to then attend a private school. In North Carolina, for example, that amounts to \$7,213 per year. Elite private institution tuition typically exceeds

\$25,000 per year or more. Thus, the vast majority of working class students using vouchers will end up in poor performing private institutions, sometimes with religious-based curriculums rejecting basic scientific facts such as evolution.

Joshua Cowen, Professor of Education Policy at Michigan State University, noted in *Time* recently that “the typical voucher school is a financially distressed, sub-prime private provider, often jumping at the chance for a tax bailout to stay open a few extra years.” Taking Wisconsin as an example, Cowen noted that 41 percent of voucher schools have closed in the state since the program began in 1990. For schools that opened in response to the voucher program, the average survival time was just four years.

Further, private schools receiving public funds, including in Florida and Indiana, are often allowed to decline students for any reason, banning LGBTQ children. They also can decline special needs students, who often require more resources than voucher programs provide. So much for parental rights to “school choice.”

Thomas Jefferson’s “wall of separation,” which is supposed to exist under the First Amendment, between the government and religion has also been punctured as private religious schools are permitted in many states to accept vouchers. In Oklahoma, that wall threatens to be completely torn down. Earlier this month, the state approved a fully publicly funded Catholic charter school, with an anticipated cost of \$23.3 million in state funding over the first five years. The non-profit Americans United for Separation of Church and State is planning a legal challenge.

The wave of privatization efforts has been funded in large measure by Betsy DeVos, the billionaire and former education secretary in the Trump administration. Her organization, American Federation for Children, provided \$9 million to fund candidates in 2022 state elections, backing almost 200 candidates. The DeVos-backed candidates have in turn spearheaded the wave of voucher legislation in 2023, including in Florida, Iowa, Arkansas, Texas and Georgia. Financial backers of DeVos’s organization include Cleveland Browns co-owners Jimmy and Dee Haslam, and Jim Walton, son of Walmart founder Sam Walton.

Concomitant with the rise in public school privatization have been rising demands in right-wing

circles for so-called “parental rights” in education. Their demands include restrictions on public school curricula and censorship of books related to sexuality, gender identity and racism. In their efforts at restricting what teachers can teach and what children can read, they accuse public schools of “indoctrinating” students, while insisting that students be indoctrinated through a curriculum consisting of a steady diet of historical mischaracterization and falsification of the many crimes of the American ruling class.

The recent efforts at censorship began in a wave of state bills passed in 2021, restricting or banning the teaching of so-called “divisive concepts” related to race, gender, sexuality and social class. Building on this, in the first half of 2022, an additional 84 bills in 26 states were pre-filed or introduced to further expand so-called parents’ rights.

In March 2023, at the federal level, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives passed the “Parents Bill of Rights Act.” While it is not expected to pass the Democratic-controlled Senate, the bill echoes many of the state bills in allowing parents to inspect books and other library materials, and requiring the public posting of curricula.

The right-wing campaign to stifle discussion and prevent the free expression of ideas in public schools is bearing its poisonous fruit: during the 2021-22 school year, PEN America found that more than 1,600 book titles were banned in schools across the country, written by over 1,200 different authors, along with the contributions of 290 illustrators and 18 translators.



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