

????Trump's universal school voucher proposal: Another handout to the rich

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4 June 2025

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In a sweeping escalation of the attack on public education, the Trump administration has embedded a nationwide private school voucher scheme in its new federal budget proposal. If passed, it will establish a universal voucher program for the first time in US history, bankrolled by an unprecedented \$5 billion annual tax credit giveaway to wealthy donors.

School vouchers are schemes by which public tax dollars designed for public schools are repackaged into “scholarships” and reallocated to families for private school. They originated in the US in the 1950s as “tuition grants” to circumvent racial integration mandated following the landmark Civil Rights ruling *Brown v. Board of Education*.

The ramifications of Trump's measure are no less reactionary. Public resources would be transferred from chronically underfunded schools serving the working class and poor into private, religious-based and elite institutions.

The initiative follows decades of billionaire-funded campaigns to open up the “education market.” Political Action Committees, such as the Koch brothers' School Freedom Fund and the American Federation for Children, supported by the family of Betsy DeVos, invested hundreds of millions of dollars into backing failed ballot initiatives to enact statewide vouchers or to target the election campaigns of legislators in opposition.

The big lie is that these are grassroots parental campaigns for “choice”; they are not. Polls consistently show that voters reject vouchers when given the chance. In fact, since 1970, voters have *never* approved a statewide ballot measure to create or expand private school vouchers, according to the National Coalition for Public Education.

State-level expansion

Trump's election has helped fuel a growing number of reactionary state-based initiatives, including the expansion or implementation of universal school vouchers (for all or most K-12 students regardless of income) or education savings account (ESA) programs. States that have recently enacted new privatization

policies include Texas, Florida, Indiana, Alabama, Utah, North Carolina, Idaho, Wyoming, Kansas and Louisiana.

Tennessee has become a case study in this effort. Starting on May 15, 2025, the state will offer 20,000 vouchers, each worth \$7,295 for the 2025–2026 academic year. These funds can be applied toward tuition and fees at over 200 participating private schools throughout the state. Any remaining funds after tuition and fees may be used for additional educational expenses, such as textbooks, tutoring, and transportation.

Within hours, over 33,000 applications were submitted, hailed by state officials as evidence of overwhelming demand. This narrative conceals a critical reality: nationwide, over 75 percent of voucher recipients already attend private schools, according to a May 2024 report by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI).

Indeed, voucher programs do not primarily serve students escaping underfunded public schools—as their proponents maintain—instead, they subsidize families already enrolled in private education. For good reason, public opposition remains widespread despite the aggressive and well-funded rollout of pro-voucher propaganda.

In several notable cases these initiatives have been blocked. These include Kentucky's Amendment 2, which aimed to enshrine tax-credit funded private school scholarships in the state constitution but was defeated by 30 percentage points in a statewide referendum. Colorado's Amendment 80, a similar attempt to restructure public education funding around private choice, was also rejected at the ballot box.

In Georgia, Senate Bill 233 passed only after sustained pressure from billionaire-funded PACs, which poured money into primary campaigns and threatened incumbents who opposed the measure. Even then, internal dissent from some Republicans concerned with popular opposition nearly derailed the legislation.

In a particularly dirty maneuver to promoting school choice, the Education Department, led by Trump acolyte Linda McMahon, issued a letter on May 7, 2025, urging states to broaden their definitions of “persistently dangerous” schools under the Unsafe School Choice Option.

This guidance cynically seizes on the problems associated with poverty to cloak the further breakup of public schools and provide the legal sanction for a mass exodus to private entities. It is a threadbare ploy. In 2023-2024, only five states reported any unsafe schools. McMahon specifically praised school privatizers in Arkansas for providing students an alternative to “unsafe

schools.”

According to a recent state report, 40 schools in Arkansas were labeled as “unsafe” for the 2023–2024 school year. Arkansas Secretary of Education Jacob Oliva, however, admitted that such a designation could be the result of even one incident, including “something that happened at a football game or on a school bus—events not directly tied to classrooms or even students.”

The fiscal fallout for public schools

The school privatization drive is a significant factor in the defunding of public schools. According to the Economic Policy Institute, states that have enacted large-scale voucher programs spend \$2,800 less per pupil on public education compared to non-voucher states.

These cuts exacerbate already profound inequalities. In high-poverty districts within voucher states, the funding shortfall averages \$11,859 per student, over 40 percent worse than in comparable districts without vouchers. The consequences are devastating: schools are forced to cut critical services, including mental health counseling, after-school programs and even nutrition.

As EPI warned in May 2024, “voucher schemes divert spending away from public education” and “expose state budgets to large future obligations that are hard to forecast,” including open-ended commitments to subsidize private tuition regardless of enrollment fluctuations or rising costs.

For example, Arizona’s 2023 universal voucher program was initially projected to cost \$33 million in its first year and \$65 million in the second. Instead, it totaled \$587 million in the first year alone and is anticipated to exceed \$708 million in 2024. A significant portion of this unforeseen expense resulted from providing vouchers to students already enrolled in private schools, effectively subsidizing private education for the wealthy. New Hampshire’s Educational Freedom Account program exhibited a similar trend—initially estimated at \$300,000, it surged to over \$25 million within three years.

This dynamic highlights the core contradiction of school choice policy: while vouchers deplete public school budgets, they also elevate total state and federal education spending by subsidizing private schooling for families who never considered public schools.

Impact on teacher compensation

On average, public school teachers in the US earn \$69,597 annually, compared to their private school counterparts, who earn an average of \$50,971. Voucher expansion will exploit this divide and decrease public school teachers’ wages. According to the Kentucky Center for Economic Policy, in 2023, average public

school teacher pay was \$15,795 lower in states with voucher programs than in those without. In states with universal or near-universal vouchers, this gap grew to \$18,859. Even after adjusting for the cost of living, teachers in voucher states earned \$5,126 less on average, and those in universal voucher states earned \$8,231 less.

Additionally, the shift of funding and enrollment to private schools results in fewer jobs in public schools and more in lower-paying private institutions. For new teachers, this trend signals a growing likelihood of entering less secure, lower-paid positions, further devaluing the profession and exacerbating teacher shortages as youth seek more lucrative career choices.

In the face of this full-scale assault, the teachers’ unions have blocked strike action in Chicago and other cities and limited themselves to lawsuits, symbolic protests, and appeals to the Democrats. This follows decades of class collaboration, with both the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) supporting the very Democratic Party-led attacks on public education that laid the groundwork for privatization.

While Trump’s blatantly illegal efforts to shutter the Department of Education has been temporarily halted by a May 22 ruling in a lawsuit brought by the NEA, AFT and multiple state attorneys general, the decision has been quickly appealed. The case is making its way through the courts, while Trump seeks to eviscerate public education through other means, including a \$12 billion budget cut to schools and obtaining congressional approval to close the cabinet-level department.

Public education cannot be defended by backdoor legal maneuvers or appeals to the Democrats, a party of the financial oligarchy. The only way forward is through the independent mobilization of the working class. We urge teachers to harness their strength by forming rank-and-file committees—democratic bodies made up of educators, school staff, parents and students—dedicated to defending public education and opposing all forms of privatization.

With tens of thousands of educators facing contract expirations this month in Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Philadelphia and other cities, rank-and-file committees must break through the AFT and NEA bureaucracies and prepare strike action as part of a counter-offensive of educators across the country to defend the right to high-quality public education for all regardless of immigration status. Such a struggle must demand the expropriation of the oligarchy and massive redistribution of wealth to meet the social rights of the working class.

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