



Education Savings Accounts are Inefficient and Ineffective for General Diffusion of Knowledge, Student Achievement and School Investments

IDRA Testimony against SB 2, Submitted to the Texas Senate Committee on Education K-16, January 28, 2025

Dear Chair Creighton and Honorable Members of the Committee:

My name is Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., and I am deputy director of policy at IDRA, an independent, non-partisan non-profit committed to achieving equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

IDRA opposes SB 2 because it presents an inefficient and ineffective educational program for Texas students and families. The attached brief from Public Funds Public Schools at the Education Law Center (2023) outlines evidence-based and legal concerns for private school voucher proposals in Texas, including education savings accounts. Among these concerns, we highlight that voucher programs are inefficient for general knowledge diffusion under any state standards; do not lead to increased educational achievement or opportunities for students; and present severe fiscal strains on state budgets and school funding.

Inefficient for General Diffusion of Knowledge

SB 2 states in Section 1 that its purpose is to “provide additional educational options” and “achieve a general diffusion of knowledge,” which the Texas Constitution cites as a core duty of the State Legislature. In the public system, schools must adhere to various requirements, including offering state-approved curriculum, student and staff trainings on safety and well-being, and other standards for student success in high school, and college, career and military readiness. In contrast, voucher programs often lack academic standards, accountability and transparency measures (see Page 3 of PFPS brief).

For instance, SB 2 provides full autonomy to private education providers or vendors in the design of their curriculum, instructional materials, teacher qualifications, and school-based policies, practices, codes and activities. Included in this autonomy is the ability for private schools or providers to discriminate against admitting a student or otherwise educating them according to their needs if they somehow are out of step with the school’s “religious or institutional values.” This is an inefficient way to provide and sustain a general diffusion of knowledge that the state has deemed necessary for all students to succeed.

Ineffective for Student Achievement

Page 2 of the PFPS brief notes studies in multiple states on the negative effects of voucher programs on students’ academic achievement. For example, in Indiana, whose voucher program requires statewide testing for participating private schools as SB 2 proposes, students in

elementary grades experienced significant achievement declines in math and English language arts (Austin, Waddington, & Berends, 2019). SB 2 requires norm-referenced testing but does not include that test scores should account for students entering and leaving the voucher program mid-year or that results should be publicly posted like the scores from public school students are.

Inefficient Investments in Schools

Page 5 of the PFPS brief explains the many ways that voucher programs additionally increase state costs for education, shift expenses from the state to parents' own pockets, and subsidize students who have not attended public schools and thus present new costs to the state – such as students already in private or homeschool, as SB 2 includes.

For example, when Arizona expanded their voucher program to be universal in 2022, over 71% of new program participants had already been in private and home schools, driving up costs by millions of dollars (Griffith & Burns, 2024). SB 2 requires administering organizations to report annually on “cost savings” to the state but makes no considerations for new educational costs assumed by the state nor for standard metrics to include in cost calculations. In addition, the voucher program would take much-needed funds from public schools that are already underfunded.

Recommendations

- Raise per-pupil public school funding through the basic allotment and adjust for inflation.
- Increase targeted student funding that makes investments in students who need it most through the bilingual education allotment, compensatory education allotment, and special education funding.
- Sustain state education investments without reducing local school districts' ability to raise local revenue.
- Ensure public education funds stay in public schools.

IDRA is available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. Thank you for your consideration. For more information, please contact Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., IDRA deputy director of policy, at chloe.sikes@idra.org.

Resources

- Abrams, S.E., & Koutsavlis, S.J. (2023). The Fiscal Consequences of Private School Vouchers. Southern Poverty Law Center, Education Law Center, Public Funds Public Schools. https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/SPLC_ELC_PFPS_2023Report_Final.pdf
- Austin, M., Waddington, R. J., & Berends, M. (2019). Voucher Pathways and Student Achievement in Indiana's Choice Scholarship Program. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 5(3), pp. 20-40. <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2019.5.3.02>
- Griffith, M., & Burns, D. (2024). Understanding the Cost of Universal School Vouchers: An Analysis of Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Account Program. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/682.951>
- PFPS. (September 19, 2023). The True Cost of Private School Voucher Programs. Public Funds Public Schools. <https://pfps.org/new-pfps-fact-sheet-the-true-cost-of-private-school-voucher-programs.html>

IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization led by Celina Moreno, J.D. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.