



Legislative Push for Georgia's Third Private School Voucher Program: UPDATED

Lawmakers propose Georgia's third private school voucher program with [SB 233](#), the Georgia Promise Scholarship Act. SB 233 would send public funds to private school without accountability for the performance of private schools, limited transparency, and no estimate of the program's cost. The voucher program outlined in SB 233 would be available to students in the lowest performing 25% of schools, as determined by the state's accountability system.¹ The vast majority of students served by these schools are low-income, a factor closely linked to poor academic outcomes. If passed into law, the voucher program would pull public funds from public schools serving these vulnerable students and send them to private schools that choose which students to serve and which to reject. There is no guarantee that these students would be better off if they used a voucher to attend a private school. [High-quality evaluations](#) of voucher programs found voucher students did worse academically than students in public schools.²

Georgia's two existing voucher programs carry an annual price tag of about \$150 million. Instead of diverting more public funds to private schools with a new voucher program, lawmakers can assist low-income students far more effectively by investing in:

- Literacy enhancements, including increasing literacy coaches and specialists, professional learning for educators, and high-quality curriculum materials
- Supplemental funding for low-income students to provide additional academic and non-academic supports
- Increasing the number of school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers to meet recommended best practices for the number of students each position should serve
- Paraprofessionals for first and second grades
- Pupil transportation, where a decades-long shortfall in state funding has contributed to bus driver shortages, learning disruptions, and increased student behavioral problems

Directing state dollars to these areas would boost educational opportunities for Georgia's low-income students and ensure they will be part of a skilled workforce that can attract high-demand, high-paying industries.

SB 233: How It Works

The Georgia Promise Scholarship Act would create [a type of voucher called an education savings account](#), or ESA. ESA voucher funds can be used for a variety of education-related expenses including private school tuition.

Voucher Amount: \$6,500 per student per year.

Student Eligibility: Students are eligible for an ESA voucher if they meet the following criteria:

- Their parent resides in Georgia and has been a Georgia resident for at least one year
- Is a U.S. citizen or in the country lawfully

- Is currently enrolled and has been continuously enrolled in a Georgia public school for at least two consecutive enrollment counts
- Resides in the attendance zone of a school in the lowest performing 25% of schools
- Does not receive a Special Needs Scholarship, which is a voucher for special education students
- Does not receive a voucher from a Student Scholarship Organization, the entity that awards vouchers funded through the state’s tax credit voucher program

The public school enrollment requirement—essentially requiring students to attend a public school for a year—is waived for students whose parents are active-duty military service members stationed in Georgia for the previous year.

Voucher Use: Voucher funds could be used for an array of items, including:

- Tuition, fees, and textbooks at private schools and online learning programs
- Tutoring services
- Purchase of curriculum including supplemental materials
- Services from a physician or therapist

Voucher funds can also be used for items approved by the Georgia Student Finance Commission, the State Board of Education, or the Parent Review Committee. The commission is tasked with implementing the program.

A committee consisting of one person with “relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities” and eight parents of eligible students would be formed to determine allowable expenditures as well as review appeals from private schools that the commission has denied participation in the program.

SB 233: A Misguided Proposal that Does Not Meet Student Needs

The voucher program proposed in SB 233 will not meet the needs of the students it aims to serve, and it falls far short of transparency and accountability measures required of public schools.

Unaligned to Student Needs: The majority of students in the lowest performing schools are low-income, and the challenges that poverty imposes on these students shape their academic outcomes.³ The link between poverty and poor academic performance is evident in data from Georgia’s accountability system for schools and districts. Schools with the highest score on the College & Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) have the lowest portion of free or reduced-price lunch students, while schools with the lowest scores have the greatest percentage of these students, as shown in the chart.⁴

Poverty & School Performance

Avg. CCRPI Score	Avg. % FRPL
94	35%
84	52%
75	65%
65	76%
53	86%

SB 233's voucher program does not offer strategies that address poverty-related barriers to learning, such as wraparound services for students and families or high-quality tutoring and summer enrichment programs. Investments such as these would support all students.

The SB 233 voucher would not be available to students in many areas across the state, even if they qualified. There are no private schools in 42 counties in Georgia, and 33 counties have only one private school.⁵ Where private schools are available, they do not provide free transportation or the free or low-cost meals that low-income families often rely on. Without these services, private schools may be inaccessible to poor students.

Private schools, including those receiving public funds through SB 233's voucher program, can turn students away. They are free to reject students with physical or developmental disabilities, those with behavioral challenges or who are behind academically. Private schools can turn away students learning English, who struggle with substance abuse or mental health conditions, or who are parents. Private schools serve only those students they choose. Public schools welcome and serve all students.

Limited Transparency & Scant Accountability: Participating students who attend a private school would take state assessments administered to public school students. Participating students who do not attend a private school would take one of at least three nationally norm-referenced tests identified by the commission in math and language arts. Assessment results would be reported to the commission. Data on the attendance, course completion, and high school graduation rates of participating students as well as their grade level, gender and race, would also be collected by the commission. Socioeconomic data and the annual retention rate of participating students would *not* be collected.

The commission would provide an annual report that would include:

- Number and demographics of participating students
- Number of participating schools, the name of each school, and the number of participating students at each school
- Participating student performance on state assessments or nationally norm-referenced tests including long-term trend data
- Satisfaction level of the parents of participating students
- Percentage of ESA funds spent on allowable expense categories
- Fiscal impact on the state and school districts

The commission is *not* required to report:

- The demographics of students at individual participating schools
- The assessment results or attendance, course completion, and high school graduation rates of participating students at individual schools
- Itemized list of expenditures approved by the parent review committee

The lack of publicly reported school-level results will hinder parents from making fully informed decisions about whether to use a voucher, particularly if there is only one private school in their area, or which private school to select. In addition, there is no mechanism to remove private schools that are consistently low-performing.

Minimal Safeguards: Under SB 233, private schools would be eligible to participate even if they have been in operation for less than one year. They would not be required to demonstrate effectiveness at improving student learning, particularly for low-income students.

Private schools would not be required to inform the parents or guardians of students with disabilities who need additional services as described in an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that the private schools are not required to provide these services. In addition, participating private schools are not required to provide prospective parents with information about costs in addition to tuition and required fees such as transportation if provided, school meals, or other expenses.

Unknown Cost: An official cost estimate—called a fiscal note— has not been prepared for SB 233, so the program’s price tag is unknown.

Expected Expansion: Most states that have launched voucher programs began with narrow eligibility criteria, limiting the number of students who can participate and the fiscal impact of the programs. Lawmakers in these states have steadily expanded eligibility criteria, and the number of participating students has grown, particularly the number of students who never attended a public school. Providing funds to students who never attended a public school is a new expense for states: It is not already-obligated state funds following a student from a public school to a private school. Given that lawmakers in Georgia have expanded the tax credit voucher program from \$58 million annually to \$120 million, it is likely that SB 233’s voucher program will be similarly expanded in the future, if it is implemented. As in other states, this will increase the program’s price tag and could constrain investments in public schools and other critical state services.

Percent of Voucher Students Already in Private Schools

- Arizona: 80%
- Indiana: 70%
- New Hampshire: 89%
- Wisconsin: 75%

¹ As originally proposed, SB 233 did not limit eligibility to students who reside in an attendance zone of a school in the 25% of lowest performing schools.

² Lubienski, C. & Canbolat, Y. (2022). *Evolving Evidence on School Voucher Effects: Policy Brief #22-4*. Center for Evaluation & Education Policy, Indiana University. Retrieved from <https://ceep.indiana.edu/education-policy/policy-briefs/2022/evolving-evidence-on-school-vouchereffects.pdf>

³ Breger, L. (2017). Poverty and student achievement in Chicago public schools. *The American Economist* (62)2, 206-216

⁴ Welsh, R. O. (2016). *Comparisons and Systems Research of States’ Accountability Measures: Preliminary Report*. Georgia Department of Education. Retrieved from https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Documents/Welsh_Comparing%20school%20accountability%20systems_Preliminary%20report.pdf

⁵ PAGE estimate based on data retrieved Private School Review https://www.privateschoolreview.com/georgia#google_vignette

⁶ Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, Indiana University. (2023). *Summary of Research on School Vouchers: Policy Brief #23-2*.

Retrieved from <https://ceep.indiana.edu/education-policy/policy-briefs/2023/research-on-school-vouchers.pdf>