



Lawmakers Push for Georgia's Third Private School Voucher Program UPDATED March 2024

Lawmakers aim to create Georgia's third private school voucher program with [SB 233](#), the Georgia Promise Scholarship Act. SB 233 would send public funds to private schools and other entities that provide educational services and products but does not hold them to the same accountability measures required of public schools. The bill passed the Senate in the 2023 session but, in a close vote, was rejected by the House. In the 2024 session, components of the proposed voucher program have been revised, and items unrelated to vouchers have been added including:

- Codifying educator pay raises announced since 2019 into the Quality Basic Education (QBE) funding formula
- Allowing districts to include their Pre-K program in their educational facilities for capital outlay funds to expand Pre-K
- Facilitating inter-district student transfers
- Increasing the annual cap on the tax credit for the Public Education Foundation to \$15 million up from \$5 million currently

Funding for the program would be set at one percent of the previous fiscal year's QBE funding. This amount would be approximately \$108 million based on QBE funding in FY 2024.

Georgia already has two existing voucher programs, which have a total annual price tag of about \$160 million. Instead of diverting more public resources to private schools with a third voucher program, lawmakers can make more strategic investments that reach more students including:

- Increasing literacy coaches and specialists, professional learning for educators, and high-quality curriculum materials to support the effective implementation of the Georgia Early Literacy Act, passed in 2023
- 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

Directing state dollars to these areas would boost educational opportunities for all of Georgia's public school students, including those who live in rural communities or struggle with the challenges of poverty.

Lawmakers should also disentangle teacher pay raises, funding for the Pre-K program, and the Public Education Foundation from their debate on private school vouchers. All of these measures are critically important and should be enacted on their own merits, not used as leverage to create additional private school vouchers.

SB 233: How It Works

The Georgia Promise Scholarship Act would create a [type of voucher](#) called an education savings account, or ESA, which would launch in July 2025. 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, which is waived for parents who are active-duty military service members stationed in Georgia during the previous 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 (SSO), the entity that awards vouchers funded through the state's tax credit voucher program

Students entering kindergarten would be exempt from the requirement to be enrolled in a public school during the previous school year. In addition, students whose family income is below 400% of the federal poverty line would be prioritized for inclusion in the program.

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
- Other expenditures approved by a committee of parents of participating voucher students

A new state agency, the Georgia Education Savings Authority (GESA), would be established to administer the ESA voucher program. The new agency would be overseen by the commission that oversees the Georgia Student Finance Commission.

A committee consisting of one person with "relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities" and eight parents of participating students would be formed to assist the new agency determine allowable expenditures as well as review appeals from private schools that GESA has denied participation in the program.

Participating private schools would be required to submit an annual report on aggregate student attendance, course completion rates, and graduation rates of participating students to GESA and the Georgia Department of Education.

Under the proposed legislation, the program would end in 2035.

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

The voucher program proposed in SB 233 is not an effective use of public resources to best serve Georgia's students.

Choice is Controlled by Private Schools, Not Parents: 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.

Unaligned to Student Needs: Vouchers have a poor track record of improving student achievement. While evaluations of early voucher programs, which were small and narrowly targeted, showed mixed effects, more recent studies have shown large and negative impacts on student achievement.¹

Vouchers are a poor fit for students in low-performing schools, the majority of whom are in families coping with the challenges of poverty. 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.²

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.

Vouchers benefit few rural students. There are no private schools in 42 counties in Georgia, and 33 counties have only one private school.³ 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.

Expected Expansion & Rising Cost: Many states, including Georgia, launched voucher programs that began with narrow eligibility criteria and limited funding. In Georgia and elsewhere, pro-voucher lawmakers have steadily expanded funding and eligibility criteria for these programs. The annual cost of Georgia's tax credit voucher program has grown from \$50 million to \$120 million, and lawmakers are currently considering two bills that would raise its price tag, including one that would hike it to \$200 million annually. Given this track record, it is likely that SB 233's voucher program, if approved, will be similarly expanded in the future. This will increase the program's cost and could constrain investments in public schools and other critical state services.

Transparency and Accountability Measures Fall Short of Public School Requirements: Participating students who attend a private school would take state assessments administered to public school students or one of at least three nationally norm-referenced tests identified by the GESA in math and language arts. Assessment results would be reported to GESA. Data on the attendance, course completion, and high school graduation rates of participating students as well as their grade level, gender, race, socioeconomic status, and English language proficiency would also be collected by the agency.

GESA would provide an annual report that would include:

¹ 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>

² 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

³ PAGE estimate based on data retrieved Private School Review https://www.privateschoolreview.com/georgia#google_vignette

- 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

While these reporting requirements exceed those of the tax credit voucher program, they do not match those required of public schools even though they benefit from public funds.

GESA is *not* required to report:

- The demographics of participating students at individual participating schools
- The assessment results or attendance, course completion retention, and high school graduation rates of participating students at individual schools
- An 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. 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.