



**CLASS EDUCATION FOR-PROFIT EDUCATION**

# Robbing From the Poor to Educate the Rich

*The bait of school vouchers—and the switch to strangling public education.*

By Jack Schneider and Jennifer C. Berkshire

**TODAY 5:30 AM**



Students and teachers from East High School in Salt Lake City walk out of school to protest the HB15 voucher bill. (Rick Egan / The Salt Lake Tribune via AP)

**T**he assault on public education currently unfolding in state legislatures across the United States stands to annually transfer tens of billions of dollars from public

treasuries to the bank accounts of upper-income families. Those dollars, which otherwise would have gone to public schools, will instead reimburse parents currently paying private school tuition. It's a reverse Robin Hood scheme that Americans would hate if they fully understood what was going on.

That's not the sales pitch, of course. As Betsy DeVos and her allies like to put it, their cause is "education freedom." They want American families to have "options" beyond their local public schools. And their plan for creating those options is to push various forms of school vouchers. The money that otherwise would have gone to local schools, instead, would be given to families. Families could then take those dollars—sometimes loaded on an actual debit card—and spend them at whatever kind of school, or on whatever kind of educational product, they want.



## Why People Don't Even Trust the Super Bowl

There are many reasons to dislike this plan. Public schools are open to all, meaning that they can't turn students away on the basis of characteristics like ability or identity. And public schools serve the public good. That's why we fund

them with our tax dollars—because we expect them to serve all of us. Private schools, by contrast, can turn students away for nearly any reason, including that they have disabilities that make them more expensive to educate. As more states adopt programs that use taxpayer dollars to fund private schools, taxpayers are increasingly footing the bill for discrimination. In Florida, for instance, a religious school that notified families this fall that LGBTQ students were no longer welcome and would be asked to leave immediately still receives more than \$1.6 million a year in public funds through the state's private school voucher program.

But school voucher plans are a raw deal not just for public schools and the students who attend them but also for taxpayers. Programs like the one jammed through by the Republican legislature in Iowa this week stand to immediately transfer massive amounts of cash directly from state treasuries to the families that least need it. While proponents, like Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds, sold the plan as a way to give choices to poor and middle-class families, the program will chiefly subsidize the parents who already send their kids to private schools. The cost of that subsidy is significant—an estimated \$340 million each year once the plan is fully phased in—and will be borne by the 500,000 students who attend the state's underfunded public schools.

And it's not just in Iowa that Republicans are pulling off this reverse Robin Hood maneuver. In Arizona, where lawmakers recently made all students eligible for school vouchers, 75 percent of the students who applied for the new subsidy never attended public school. The same dynamic is playing out in New Hampshire, where GOP legislators enacted an “education freedom” program over stiff public opposition. At

Laconia Christian Academy, for instance, all but two families in the school took advantage of the program, pulling roughly half a million dollars out of the public treasury.

While earlier voucher programs, like the one adopted in Milwaukee more than 30 years ago, were limited to families enrolled in public schools, and came with strict income qualifications, the plans being adopted now dispense with any such limits, or adopt them only as temporary gestures designed as political cover. The real goal is always a universal voucher open to all. And the math here isn't pretty. Approximately 10 percent of students are presently enrolled in private schools—that's just under 5 million students who would qualify for vouchers worth roughly \$10,000 each, depending on the per-pupil expenditures in their states. When public schools are already systematically underfunded in most parts of the country, draining off an additional \$50 billion each year will hurt quite a bit.

Who will benefit? Boosters claim it will be students presently denied "options." Yet most families won't leave their public schools. According to polling, most are satisfied with their children's schools, even if they'd like to see more resources directed to them. And many families—like those in rural areas, or low-income families with limited access to transportation—are unlikely to *ever* have many viable "options." Forty-two of Iowa's 99 counties don't have a single private school. Neither do the majority of zip codes in Utah, where yet another budget-busting voucher program is under consideration. For rural communities, draining resources from the public system is just another disinvestment in their children.

Mainly, the beneficiaries of these schemes will be the families presently paying private school tuition. An extra \$10,000 or so each year, for each child presently enrolled in private school, will pay for things that will remain out of reach for most American families—a luxury vacation, a down payment on a new car, an addition to the retirement account. For those families wealthy enough to stockpile voucher money while continuing to pay private school tuition, the additional funds may even pay for college, as one Iowa Republican acknowledged last year.

Those left behind will simply have fewer resources. And that's part of the design. Cutting the nation's public school budgets off at the knees will dramatically reduce the tax burden on the wealthy. Equally important, it will shift schooling out of the realm of democratic politics and into the free market. And perhaps best of all in the eyes of voucher supporters, it will deal a fatal blow to teachers unions.

In an age of staggering income inequality, America's public education system remains one of the last and best mechanisms for advancing equal opportunity. And that is precisely why it is a target. For all their high-minded rhetoric about "education freedom," advocates of voucher schemes have repeatedly tipped their hands, revealing what they really value. They've got their own version of Robin Hood, and he already has his hands in the public purse. **N**

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