

Texas Is Poised to Create a \$1 Billion Private School Voucher Program

The Texas House approved the plan, part of a push by President Trump's allies to offer up to about \$10,000 for private school, home-school or virtual learning.

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The Texas voucher program is expected to reach up to 90,000 students in its first year, and to grow quickly. Desiree Rios for The New York Times

The Texas House of Representatives voted early Thursday morning to create one of the largest taxpayer-funded school voucher programs, a hard-fought victory for private school choice activists as they turn their attention to a nationwide voucher push.

The measure still has some legislative hurdles to clear before Gov. Greg Abbott signs it into law, but the House vote — 85 to 63 — secured a win that was decades in the making, propelled by the governor's hardball politics last year. It was also a significant defeat for Democrats, teachers' unions and some rural conservatives who had long worried that taxpayer-funded private-school vouchers would strain public school budgets.

The program would be capped at \$1 billion in its first year, but could grow quickly, potentially reaching [an estimated \\$4.5 billion a year](#) by 2030. The funds can be used for private school tuition and for costs associated with home-schooling, including curriculum materials and virtual learning programs.

The bill was championed by an ascendant wing of the Republican Party, closely allied with President Trump and important conservative donors, including Betsy DeVos, Mr. Trump's wealthy former education secretary, and Jeff Yass, a billionaire financier from Pennsylvania and a Republican megadonor.

Hours before the vote, the president spoke by phone to Mr. Abbott and Republican representatives, urging them to support the measure. "It's a really forward-thinking vote," Mr. Trump said, [his voice heard on speakerphone](#). "Whatever I can do, let me know."

Those in the room cheered.

"It's time to provide a full array of options to parents," Representative Brad Buckley, a sponsor of the bill, said from the House floor before the vote.

Conservatives and some liberal allies, especially in urban centers, have long argued that vouchers would free parents from underperforming public schools, while competition from private schools would force public education to improve. Opponents, especially teachers' unions, have argued just as vociferously that taxpayer-funded vouchers would drain resources from public education and leave children with the fewest resources stuck in underfunded public schools of last resort.

Representative Chris Turner, a Democrat from the Dallas area, accused supporters of seeking to resegregate education.

The measure, he said, "will harm students with disabilities. It will harm rural students."

At the very least, some Democrats argued that what they called a "voucher scam" was a giveaway to parents who have already opted out of public

education. The savings accounts would not be large enough to cover the full tuition of some private schools, but would instead offset the expenses of children already enrolled in such schools, opponents argued.

"With this bill," said Representative James Talarico, a Democrat from the Austin area, "we're giving money to parents who are already sending their kids to private school."

For years, charter schools and public school choice seemed to be a compromise between Democrats and Republicans. But as the Covid-19 pandemic raised dissatisfaction with public education, conservative donors and their advocacy groups broke the stalemate in some states, advancing their vision of unrestrained parental choice, in which as many tax dollars as possible are redirected to families to spend on private education.

Before Texas, states such as Arizona, West Virginia and Iowa passed a new form of private-school voucher known as an education savings account, or ESA.

It gives money directly to parents — not to private schools — and is notable for the flexibility it grants in how the funds can be spent.

Supporters of private school choice said that because Texas was the last major Republican-led state to embrace the policy, attention would now shift to Washington. Mr. Trump and some congressional Republicans are attempting to pass a [federal tax credit](#) for private school scholarships, which could spread private school vouchers nationwide, including into Democratic-led states.

"It has been a 40-year hand-to-hand fight," said Genevieve Collins, the Texas director for Americans for Prosperity, a conservative group that has pushed for the education savings account program. "This is genuinely

transformative, not just for Texas, but for the rest of the country."

Clay Robison, a spokesman for the Texas State Teachers Association, an affiliate of the National Education Association, said public school students could experience larger class sizes, canceled enrichment programs and more substitute teachers as public funds flow to private schools.

"All of those hurt students," he said, pointing out that the vast majority of private schools in Texas are Christian or Catholic. "This has to do with, basically, helping perpetuate a religious viewpoint."

The Texas Senate had already passed a similar school choice plan. Now members of the two chambers must align their proposals, after a final procedural vote in the House, expected this week.

But with support in the Texas House now confirmed by Thursday's vote, the last real hurdle has been cleared. An amendment to put the measure to a popular referendum was voted down.

Mr. Abbott, a Republican, raised and spent millions last year in a successful effort to oust nearly a dozen Republican representatives who had opposed the measure. He exerted pressure on Republicans up until the end.

"This is an extraordinary victory," Mr. Abbott said in a statement after the vote. "When it reaches my desk, I will swiftly sign this bill into law."

The Texas program would provide about \$10,000 to students for private school tuition, or up to \$30,000 for disabled students. It would also offer up to \$2,000 for home-schooling costs. If demand exceeds funding, priority for the money will go to children with disabilities and those from low-income and middle-class households who were previously enrolled in public schools. But the money could eventually become available to any child,

including those already enrolled in private education.

The funding will come out of the state's general fund.

Nationwide, more than one million American students now use public dollars for private education, double the number from 2019. The Texas program is expected to reach up to 90,000 students in its first year.

Vouchers have been a priority for Mr. Abbott for several years. But strong resistance from Democrats and some rural Republicans in the Texas House — who feared the program would undercut their local schools — prevented it from becoming law.

Last year, Mr. Abbott personally targeted many of those Republican opponents, backing primary challengers in more than a dozen races. He received help from billionaire donors from outside the state who infused those local races with millions of dollars. Mr. Yass alone gave Mr. Abbott \$10 million in campaign cash last year.

Representatives for Mr. Yass declined an interview request.

No Republican member rose to speak against the measure during the floor debate, which began Wednesday afternoon and stretched nearly 11 hours, into Thursday. No Democrat voted in favor of its passage.

There has often been resistance to private school vouchers in conservative rural regions, where few private schools exist and public school districts are sometimes a county's largest employer.

But the growth of alternative models for education has convinced some policymakers that rural students will have more options than they would have in the past. Those models include for-profit virtual schools and [microschools](#), which are often run by a single educator working out of a

home or a rented space.

The campaign for the bill focused heavily on mobilizing church communities and appealing to parents angry about liberal ideas in the curriculum, particularly around gender, sexuality and race. Mr. Abbott held numerous events at Christian schools to rally support for the measure.

A casualty in the fight over education savings accounts in recent years has been new funding for Texas public schools, which have not seen their budgets increase along with inflation. As part of the negotiations to win over the Texas House, lawmakers also approved nearly \$8 billion in additional funding for public schools. Advocates said something closer to \$20 billion was needed to get back to 2019 school funding levels in Texas.

Many Democrats and opponents of private school vouchers point out that in states where the idea has been submitted directly to voters, through ballot initiatives, it has [generally failed](#).

But supporters say that the proof that parents want these programs is reflected in the deluge of applications for them once they are created.

Nationally, parents of children with disabilities have been especially enthusiastic about vouchers and ESAs. Private schools do not have the same legal obligations as public schools to provide disability services. But those parents often say they are seeking smaller class sizes and more personal attention.

Danielle Chavez, of Beaumont, Texas, hoped to be among them. She said she was excited about the bill because her youngest child, a 3-year-old boy, has autism spectrum disorder, and she believes he would benefit from being home-schooled.

Ms. Chavez, who works in human resources, said she could envision partnering with other busy parents through something like a church-based home-schooling cooperative.

The money for expenses would be crucial, she said, even if it did not fully cover her costs.

"That number is going to be helpful no matter what," she said, "because it's going to be more than zero."

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