

A Timeline of the School Voucher Steamroller in Utah

Published: Friday, 20 December 2024 12:22

Written by: Anna Thomas



In this post, we'll discuss the steady steamrolling of school vouchers into Utah—a state where only 3% of students attend private schools, just 5% are homeschooled, and the vast majority of families report high satisfaction with their local public schools.

Unpopular All Over

School vouchers have never been popular in Utah. On this point, our state is hardly unique: when states put these programs to a vote, voters reject them. In the recent election, [vouchers decisively lost](#) wherever they appeared on the ballot:

- [In Kentucky](#), voters rejected a new voucher program nearly a two-to-one margin.
- [In Nebraska](#), a majority of voters in almost all 93 counties voted to repeal the existing state voucher program.
- [In Colorado](#), school privatization activists tried an indirect approach, proposing a “right to school choice” in the state’s constitution. Voters saw through it. They recognized it as a first step toward a voucher program and rejected the measure at the ballot box.

A Timeline of the School Voucher Steamroller in Utah

Published: Friday, 20 December 2024 12:22

Written by: Anna Thomas

In Arizona, a 2018 proposal sought to expand the state's voucher program to all families, including the wealthiest—far beyond the disadvantaged students originally targeted. Voters said no: [the ballot measure failed](#), with about 65% of voters rejecting the proposal. Despite that clear message, Arizona politicians passed House Bill 2853 four years later, doing exactly what voters told them not to. Today, Arizona's voucher program—the most sprawling in the nation—is [causing a state budget meltdown](#).

2007: Unpopular in Utah, from the Beginning

If this pattern sounds familiar—legislators ignoring constituents on private school voucher issues—that's because it has happened in Utah, too.

In 2007, school privatization activists tried to start a voucher program in Utah. That year, the Utah Legislature narrowly passed a bill launching [the nation's first "universal" school voucher program](#); HB148, sponsored by Rep. Steve Urquhart (R-Saint George) and Sen. Curt Bramble (R-Provo), squeaked through a House floor vote by a single vote (38 to 37).

But the public never warmed to the idea. Public education supporters organized to put the new voucher law before Utah voters in the 2007 election. [Utahns promptly shut it down before the program even began, with 62% voting against school vouchers](#).

2022: Another Swing and Miss for Vouchers in Utah

Utah voters' rejection of vouchers in 2007 did not dissuade the legislature from revisiting vouchers. Fifteen years later, a voucher program was reintroduced, and rebranded as the ["Hope Scholarship."](#) By then, national school privatization proponents had found success planting new programs in other "red" states like Oklahoma, Louisiana, Mississippi.

Utah leaders claimed public opinion of vouchers had shifted—but [refused to release the polls that allegedly proved it](#). This time, legislative leadership fully backed Rep. Candace Pierucci (R-Riverton) and Sen. Kirk Cullimore (R-Draper) in their sponsorship of [HB331](#), seeking \$36 million to create the new voucher program. The 2022 voucher bill was overwhelmingly rejected by the Utah House of

A Timeline of the School Voucher Steamroller in Utah

Published: Friday, 20 December 2024 12:22

Written by: Anna Thomas

Representatives, failing 22-53. At the time, Governor Spencer Cox said he would veto the bill if it came to his desk—stating that he was “all in” on school vouchers, but couldn’t support them until public school teachers had higher starting salaries.

Before the end of 2022, Governor Cox and legislative leaders devised a new tactic to force vouchers through: [they tied the voucher program to public school teacher pay raises](#). State leaders knew the voucher program would be unpopular with constituents, so they crafted a scenario wherein support for *unpopular* vouchers could be confused with support for *popular* public school teachers. It was a political tactic designed to blur the lines between support for teachers and assent to school privatization.

2023: Rebranded and Guaranteed to Pass

The voucher scheme was reintroduced during the 2023 session, rebranded again, as the “Utah Fits All Scholarship.” The new bill, [HB215, “Funding for Teacher Salaries and Optional Education Opportunities”](#), which unnecessarily tied to teacher pay raises with a voucher program, also came with fewer accountability safeguards, and demanded even more money: \$42.5 million. With the shield of “teacher pay” as cover, only a handful of Republicans dared vote against it. Multiple attempts to address major concerns in the bill—such as the [lack of anti-discrimination protections](#)—failed. The bill sailed through in under two weeks, and Governor Cox signed it by the end of January.

2024: Doubling Down on Privatization

Legislative leaders allocated an additional \$40 million to the program in the 2024 session—*before the program had issued a single voucher*. To justify the new funding, voucher champions insisted that the completion of many online forms by people asking to be given more information about the program, signaled massive public interest. Sponsors of the appropriation request, Rep. Pierucci and Sen. Cullimore, originally requested an eye-popping \$150 million more for the still-untested program, which had not started and still had no evidence of positive outcomes.

2025: Full Speed Ahead, Still No Accountability

A Timeline of the School Voucher Steamroller in Utah

Published: Friday, 20 December 2024 12:22

Written by: Anna Thomas

Ahead of the 2025 Session, the legislative sponsors and their private school partners in the community have signaled that they will [request an additional \\$200 million in the 2025 session](#)—again, with no supportive data about outcomes or performance. Legislative leaders have already indicated they will increase voucher funding at the request of these privatization activists.

There is [no public information about how the \\$82.5 million in taxpayer funds](#) already funneled into the Utah Fits All program has been used so far.

Small wonder that a recent [Utah Foundation poll](#) highlights deep dissatisfaction with the political status quo: “politicians listening to voters” ranked among the highest priorities of voters, and more Utahns than ever believe the state is on the “wrong track.”

2025 Update: More Money, More Problems

Despite having no evidence that Utah's new school voucher program is producing good results for students, legislators once again increased the funding for the program during the 2025 session.

Pro-voucher politicians got the memo about a tightening state budget, and asked for only \$80 million instead of the expected \$200 million. Legislators gave the program "only" \$40 million - but that means nearly \$123 million per year is getting pumped into a political project that has already experienced some public embarrassments.

In January, USBE reported that nearly 200 students were receiving vouchers *and also* enrolled in public school for the 2024-25 school year. In February, the public learned that school vouchers could be used to purchase ski passes at local resorts. In response to public pressure, legislators created some limited financial oversight and spending restrictions via [HB455, "Utah Fits All Scholarship Program Amendments](#)," sponsored by Utah's pro-voucher legislative champions, Rep. Candace Pierucci (R-Herriman) and Sen. Kirk Cullimore (R-Sandy).

In our next post, we will talk about the persistent unpopularity of vouchers, how elected officials continue to ignore that reality, and who really benefits from a big private school voucher program paid for by our tax dollars (spoiler alert: not Utah children, or their families).

A Timeline of the School Voucher Steamroller in Utah

Published: Friday, 20 December 2024 12:22

Written by: Anna Thomas

Read more from our series, Vouchers and School Privatization:

Part 1: The Basics of Utah's New School Privatization Program



The first part of this series explains how Utah's school voucher program, titled Utah Fits All Scholarship, is meant to work and how it is managed.

[Read Part 1](#)

Part 3: Utahns Like Their Public Schools, So Who Exactly Does Want Vouchers?



The third part of this series discusses public opinion on vouchers and how Utah's voucher push is part of a nationwide, billionaire-funded agenda to privatize education.

[READ PART 3](#)

Part 4: Vouchers. Don't. Work.



The fourth part of this series discusses the research on voucher efficacy. Overwhelming data shows vouchers don't work.

[READ PART 4](#)

FAQ's: Understanding Vouchers and School Privatization in Utah



A Timeline of the School Voucher Steamroller in Utah

Published: Friday, 20 December 2024 12:22

Written by: Anna Thomas

This FAQ page addresses key concerns surrounding school vouchers and their impact on Utah's education system, exploring the promises made by voucher supporters and the reality of their effectiveness.

[READ FAQ'S](#)