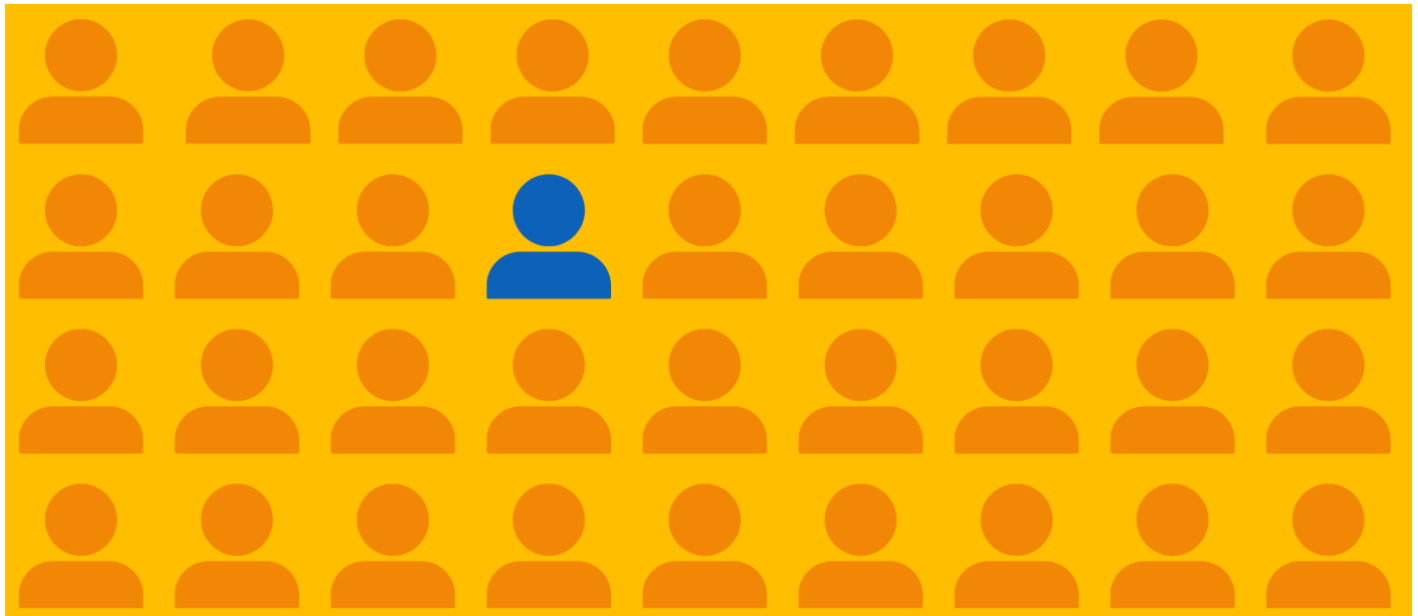


Utahns Like Their Public Schools, So Who Exactly DOES Want Vouchers?

Published: Tuesday, 14 January 2025 15:28

Written by: Anna Thomas



More than 90% of Utah students attend a public school (neighborhood school or public charter school). About [5% of children in Utah are homeschooled](#), slightly less than the national average (6%). [Only 3% of Utah students attend private school](#), dramatically lower than the national average (10%).

In November 2023, [the Deseret News polled Utah parents](#) and found that 84% said they were somewhat (41%) or very (43%) satisfied with their neighborhood school. Homeschooling parents were dramatically overrepresented in the polling data.

Polling shows the vast majority of Utahns use and like their public schools. What they really want is to see those public schools improved with additional state funding. A recent poll by the [Sutherland Institute](#) revealed that education funding is a top priority of likely Utah voters - second only to housing affordability. They say their [top education concerns](#) are:

- better pay for public school teachers,
- smaller class sizes, and
- adequate funding for students.

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A Small, Determined Minority Are Pushing Vouchers

The “Utah Fits All” scholarship program didn’t emerge organically, from local needs or parent demands. Utah voters have repeatedly said that they want our public K-12 education system improved—not replaced with a private system where education businesses can capitalize on students.

When the [Sutherland Institute asked likely voters](#) in late 2024 about their familiarity with Utah’s school voucher program,

- **75% said they were not even aware of the voucher program;**
- 17% said they were aware of it; and
- 8% weren’t sure.

When the [Deseret News asked parents \(with homeschoolers overrepresented\)](#) in 2023 whether they planned to apply for a voucher:

- **65% said “no” they would not;**
- 19% said “maybe” they would;
- 8% “didn’t know” if they would; and
- Only 8% said they “definitely” planned to apply.

So...why are we stuck funding a school voucher program?

Utah Has Been Dragged into a National Voucher Campaign

The voucher push currently steamrolling Utah’s political process is part of a nationwide, billionaire-funded agenda to privatize education. Dr. Josh Cowen, a long-time evaluator and early proponent of voucher programs, details these coordinated efforts in his book [The Privateers: How Billionaires Created a Culture War and Sold School Vouchers](#) (Harvard Education Press, 2024).

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Thanks to Dr. Cowen's meticulous research, we know that students aren't the primary beneficiaries of school voucher programs. The spread of vouchers is most beneficial to:

- **Private Schools:** People (and churches) who run, or want to start, private schools.
- **Prejudiced Communities:** Private school communities (including parents) that want to exclude kids of color, LGBTQ kids, and kids with disabilities; and
- **Politicians:** elected officials and others looking for national recognition, funding, and influence.

New and Existing Private Schools Cash In On Vouchers

Following the development of school voucher programs over the past 35 years, we know a lot about how private schools directly benefit from the taxpayer money available via vouchers.

Did you know that the majority of voucher users already attend private school or homeschool? In many states, between 70% and 89% of voucher students never attended public school in the first place.



Vouchers are really for families who already don't participate in the public school system, not families looking for a new alternative. That means the private schools themselves benefit most. [Many schools raise tuition when vouchers are introduced](#), so they make more money while families still pay plenty for their kids to attend.

When voucher programs roll into a state, so do a lot of new private schools. Knowing a secure source of (public) funding is available, these new education ventures hastily pop up to cash in on voucher dollars.

New private schools and microschools are able to avoid all sorts of pesky oversight and quality assurance regarding student outcomes, making them an attractive money-making venture. However, these start-up school business ventures often tend

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to [close after only a few years](#), too. Start-up voucher schools can [fail twice as fast](#) as established private schools that take vouchers.

Religious schools appear to be best at cashing in on vouchers. Christian leaders are [pushing churches to open their own new private religious schools](#) to participate in a “Christian education reformation.” [Vouchers make it much easier for churches](#) to create their own schools, supported by tax dollars.

“School Choice” is Really About the *School’s* Choice

Voucher programs allow public money to be used to fund private discrimination. “School choice” conveniently allows private schools to choose who they want to educate, and to exclude whomever they don’t.

The [racist history of school voucher programs](#)—in direct response to the [Supreme Court ruling](#) that ended segregated public schools in 1952—is more than we can cover here! Suffice it to say the [connections between school vouchers and desegregation](#) are impossible to ignore. Private schools, micro-schools, and homeschools do not have the same obligations or oversight as public schools do when it comes to racial integration.

Private schools using public voucher money can also exclude LGBTQ students without consequence. This is a boon for private Christian schools in particular, whether they discriminate openly or covertly. A [study of Indiana’s voucher program](#) revealed that schools with public anti-LGBT policies received more than \$16 million in public money through vouchers.

Voucher schools are also free to reject children with disabilities and have no obligation to accommodate disabilities (such as through an Individual Education Plan or IEP). In 2017, [the Government Accountability Office found](#) that parents using vouchers to send their kids to private schools are often not informed that their child no longer has the same rights regarding acceptance and accommodation of disabilities of any kind.

Kudos Take Priority Over Constituents

Despite the many problems with school voucher programs—especially “universal”

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ones—Utah politicians continue to push vouchers on the public. Why?

One short answer is that people with money and influence want them to. You may recognize some of the names of those who are funding this movement: [Betsy Devos](#) (Amway billionaire), [Charles Koch](#) (manufacturing billionaire), [Jeff Yass](#) (TikTok billionaire), and Tim Dunn (oil and gas billionaire). There is substantial political support and campaign funding available to politicians who push school vouchers.

There is also political recognition and influence to be gained. For example, the [American Legislative Exchange Council \(ALEC\)](#) offers a high national profile (and [awards!](#)) to legislators who follow [ALEC's "school choice" legislative directives](#).

In our next and final blog, we will discuss the most important thing about vouchers: how they impact children. Do school vouchers actually really help students? Do voucher students do better than public school students? (Spoiler alert: no).

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 2: A Timeline of the School Voucher Steamroller in Utah



Part two discusses the steady steamrolling of school vouchers in Utah—a state where only 3% of students attend private schools, 5% are homeschooled, and the vast majority of families report high satisfaction with their local public schools.

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[READ PART 2](#)

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



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](#)