

Public funding of private schools back on Georgia GOP agenda for 2024



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Sen. Greg Dolezal, R-Cumming, answers a question about SB 233, which would provide vouchers to public school students to attend private school, on Crossover Day at the Georgia Capitol on Monday, March 6, 2023. (Natrice Miller / Natrice.miller@ajc.com)

“I was very surprised,” Parsons said of the call.



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Georgia State Rep. Don Parsons is seen at an Appropriations General Government Subcommittee meeting at the Georgia Capitol in Atlanta on Friday, Jan. 20, 2023. (Arvin Temkar / arvin.temkar@ajc.com)

Parsons was one of 16 Republicans who voted against [Senate Bill 233](#). Passage would require six additional votes. Backers say it will remain a priority when the biennial legislative session resumes in January.

It sought to establish the first direct state payments for private education to the parents of students without [special needs or medical conditions](#) that require accommodations.

Explore [Georgia voucher bill came close to passing but lacked enough GOP votes](#)

This bill's author, [Sen. Greg Dolezal](#), R-Cumming, has been pushing unsuccessfully for vouchers since he arrived in the Senate in 2019.

“The winds have changed on this issue,” he said at a Moms for Liberty forum in November in Gwinnett County, noting that “heavy hitters,” from Gov. Brian Kemp on down, were backing the legislation.

The conservative parental rights group drew a receptive crowd for Dolezal’s news about his bill: A campaign was underway to pressure the 16 GOP House members who’d helped Democrats waylay it.



Credit: Ty Tagami

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Sen. Greg Dolezal, R-Cumming, (left, on stage) talks about vouchers and other legislative priorities with other state lawmakers and Moms for Liberty co-founder Tina Descovich (center) at the Gas South Convention Center in Duluth on Monday, Nov. 13, 2023. (Ty Tagami / Ty.Tagami@ajc.com)

The “[Georgia Promise Scholarship Act](#)” would give \$6,500 a year to the families of public school students who leave a low-performing public school. They could use the money to enroll in a private school or for costs associated with home schooling.

Proponents say every child is unique and should be able to get a tailored education — with the help of taxpayers — even if it’s not at the public school serving their neighborhood. They contend that many public schools have not evolved with society and are not preparing enough children for success.

“Factories of failure,” is how former U.S. Sen. Kelly Loeffler, who spoke at the event with Dolezal, described some public schools.

Opponents suspect SB 233 would annually divert tens of millions of dollars from public schools. They note that the annual amount of each voucher would cover only a portion of the cost of tuition at many private schools. So they argue that wealthier families would be the most likely to benefit, leaving poor kids to languish in increasingly impoverished public schools.

“This bill does nothing but perpetuate the gross inequities that have existed in our state’s educational system for far too long,” [Rep. Miriam Paris](#), D-Macon, said on the House floor in March.

Early research suggested that students who received vouchers outperformed peers who stayed behind in public schools. But those voucher programs were small by today’s standards. More recent research in states with much larger programs, including Louisiana and Ohio, has [documented worse academic outcomes](#) for voucher recipients.

Yet vouchers remain popular among Republicans. When the GOP primary ballot asked those voters in 2020 if state education dollars should “follow” students “to the school that best fits their needs,” even if it’s private, 73% said yes. Support grew to 79% when a similar nonbinding advisory question appeared on the 2022 Republican primary ballot.

The surveys yielded similar reactions among Republican voters across the jurisdictions represented by those 16 GOP House members who opposed SB 233, noted Tony West, a voucher advocate in Georgia.

“Those folks are a little bit out of step with their constituents,” said West, state director of Americans for Prosperity, a libertarian conservative political policy network.

Three out of 4 Republicans supported vouchers in Cherokee and Cobb counties, the areas represented by Parsons. But he said survey results can be misleading and that he’s not heard a groundswell of interest in vouchers among his constituents.

Parsons said he voted against SB 233 partly because the school systems in his legislative area have high-performing schools, so most of his constituents wouldn’t have access to the vouchers. The legislation restricts participation to students in schools performing in the bottom quartile in Georgia.

“We have Republican-controlled boards of education in both those counties,” Parsons said, “and as far as I can tell, they’re doing a good job.”

State [Rep. Todd Jones](#), R-Cumming, who carried Dolezal’s voucher bill to the House floor in March, is vowing to bring it back next year.

Asked about the pressure campaign that Dolezal said was aimed at flipping the 16 GOP “no” votes, Jones chose diplomatic language.

“We’re having conversations with our caucus,” he said, adding, “we are absolutely confident in our caucus.”

