

# Proposed law would mean more private school vouchers for Georgians



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State Rep. Todd Jones, R-Cumming, answers a question about Senate Bill 233 at the House of Representatives in Atlanta on Thursday, March 23, 2023. (Arvin Temkar / arvin.temkar@ajc.com)

Georgia lawmakers are talking again about spending more taxpayer dollars on private education. It's a sometimes bitter debate entangled with the nation's history of racial segregation and income inequality that has forced some students to attend shabby schools.

Proponents, mostly Republicans, say they can break that cycle by giving families \$6,500 per student to leave their public school. The state would then deduct the school's funding for that student. Opponents of this latest "voucher" measure say that would be harmful and that the solution is to invest more in public schools.

[Senate Bill 233](#) is similar to legislation that has failed in prior years. It would let parents use state money for private school tuition or expenses associated with schooling at home, such as textbooks and tutoring.

But this legislation has made it farther than predecessors, [narrowly passing the state Senate](#) in a party-line vote in early March. It reached the floor of the state House on Thursday. It stalled after about two hours of debate though it could return for a vote before the legislative session ends.

[Rep. Reynaldo "Rey" Martinez](#), R-Loganville, said it would give parents an alternative to a "failing" public school, something he said he lacked as a young immigrant.

“It gives my people, my community, a choice,” he said.

Nearly all of those who spoke for the measure were white Republicans. Nearly all of those opposed were Black Democrats.

[Rep. Doreen Carter](#), D-Lithonia, noted that private school tuition can cost thousands of dollars more than \$6,500 and that low-income families would struggle to cover the gap. SB 233 would limit eligibility to those attending the lowest-achieving 25% of public schools, based mostly on Georgia Milestones test scores. Those schools are usually in poor neighborhoods, where Carter said affluent families would move to get a voucher — at the expense of those public schools. The state would cease sending each public school the funding associated with each of their withdrawn students, an amount that varies but on average is a little more than the proposed voucher amount.

Georgia already has [one voucher program](#) but it is open only to students with disabilities. Another program has an effect similar to vouchers but relies on tax credit contributions rather than direct state funding.

The answer to a key question is in dispute: Do vouchers, on balance, improve academic outcomes?

Patrick Wolf, an education professor at the University of Arkansas, said the answer is yes.

Academic studies have produced “pretty mixed” results, but more of the “rigorous” studies have shown positive outcomes, he said.

Joshua Cowen, an education professor at Michigan State University, was involved in a couple of the studies that Wolf cites in his own research.

Cowen said the answer is no.

Older voucher programs produced positive results, he said, but as programs grew over time, drawing more operators into the market, the results tanked. This is documented by recent studies in Ohio and Louisiana where the research found “huge negative impacts” on test scores, he said. “It’s hard for me to articulate how bad these results are.”

Cowen said the declines associated with vouchers were “almost double” those attributed to COVID-19.

Wolf said studies that have tracked students over time have found more consistently positive outcomes with high school graduation rates and even enrollment in college. He also said public schools that faced competition from vouchers tended to improve.

Cowen agrees but said these gains have been modest and merit further study.

Opponents also cite historical links to racism. After the U.S. Supreme Court ordered public schools to desegregate in 1954, some Southern states, [including Georgia](#), reacted by establishing vouchers for white students. Georgia’s program was short-lived.

But the story is more complicated now. Amanda McGee, who lives in Atlanta, said she withdrew her son from a low-performing public school. The students there were nearly all Black because of the way school attendance zones are tied to housing prices, said McGee, a Realtor who is Black. That is a form of “active discrimination,” she said.

She now home-schools her son, who, at 11, enjoys reading the U.S. Constitution and testified for the bill at a recent hearing. McGee said he would be ill-served by his public school.

“He needs books that aren’t just ‘The Cat in the Hat,’” she said.