

# Georgia House votes for wider access to school vouchers, amid criticism



Credit: Natrice Miller/AJC

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Speaker Pro Tem Jan Jones, R-Milton, speaks in favor of Senate Bill 233 at the Georgia State Capitol on Thursday, March 14, 2024. The bill would give \$6,500 a year in state funds to the parents of each child who opts for private schooling. (Natrice Miller/ Natrice.miller@ajc.com)

After many years of trying, Georgia Republicans have finally gotten a general school voucher bill through the state House of Representatives.

[Senate Bill 233](#), which would give families \$6,500 a year to subsidize the cost of private schooling, passed by the bare minimum 91 votes Thursday after vigorous debate and after overcoming some of the GOP opposition that temporarily stopped it last year.

Republicans said it would help poor kids escape “failing” schools, but Democrats said it would just cut private school costs for the rich, leaving the poor kids behind in increasingly underfunded public schools.

The legislation could cost taxpayers \$140 million a year. Seven of the 16 Republicans who defied their party leadership and voted against SB 233 last year switched their votes this time after the bill saw major amendments. One of their chief concerns was the cost and potential impact on their local public schools.

In a bid to win them over, the GOP leadership in the House piled on inducements, from inserting recent teacher pay raises into the state’s school funding formula that will inform future budgets to providing

state grants for public pre-kindergarten. They also capped the cost at 1% of the state's public school budget.

That didn't satisfy critics.

"It is still and remains a tool to defund public education," said [Rep. Miriam Paris](#), D-Macon. She and others said the state should instead invest more in public schools.

Proponents, including [Speaker Pro Tem Jan Jones](#), said concerns about impoverishing the schools were hyperbole. The Republican from Milton said the funding cap would limit participation to some 21,000 students, in a public system of more than 1.7 million.

She added that more money wouldn't improve life in public schools for all students, such as victims of bullying.

They need a way out, said Jones, an architect of the amended bill. "The goal is to help individual children."

The amendments to SB 233 mean it will have to make another trip through the Senate for final approval. That vote could come soon.

Then it would be up to Gov. Brian Kemp to sign it. [He's been pushing for passage of the measure](#), including during his State of the State address in January.

Georgia already has a voucher program, but it is restricted to students with special needs and medical conditions. There is also a private school scholarship that is funded through tax credits, which [the state Supreme Court has said is not publicly funded](#). SB 233 would be the first program open to any student, with one exception: They would have to live in the attendance zone of a school performing in the bottom 25% on state measures.

To be eligible, students would have to attend that school for a year, though the bill was changed this year to let incoming kindergartners bypass that requirement.

In addition to tuition, parents could spend the money on costs associated with homeschooling, such as books, tutors or online classes. They could also spend it on doctors, transportation and other costs approved by a state committee that would be established.

The subsidies would only be available if the Legislature were to appropriate funding for it each year.

Under the amended bill, if there are more takers for the vouchers than funding allows, families earning less than 400% of the federal poverty level, or about \$120,000 for a family of four, would be at the front of the line.



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House members vote on Senate Bill 233 at the Georgia Capitol on Thursday, March 14, 2024. The bill, which passed 91-82, would give \$6,500 a year in state funds to the parents of each child who opts for private schooling. (Natrice Miller/ Natrice.miller@ajc.com)

The new version of SB 233, described by several lawmakers as growing into an “omnibus” bill, now contains language that places \$6,500 of cumulative past teacher pay raises into the state’s education funding formula. Those had been added to the budget each year by Kemp with the Legislature’s consent.

The bill also would allow students to transfer between districts, taking their state funding with them. The consent of their home district would no longer be required. It also includes language that, for the first time, would send state money to public schools to help them build pre-kindergarten classrooms.

Another new addition to win over wary Republicans: The voucher program, which would begin with the 2025-26 school year, would expire a decade later unless lawmakers extend it.

SB 233 needed the approval of more than half of the 180 House members for passage, and narrowly achieved that, with a vote of 91-82. Last year, it fell six votes shy despite the backing of Republican leaders from both the House and Senate, and pressure from Kemp.

The voting this time again drew massive opposition from Democrats. [Rep. Patty Marie Stinson](#), D-Butler, defied her party and voted for it. [Rep. Mesha Mainor](#), an Atlanta legislator who did the same thing last year, and then switched from Democrat to Republican, repeated her vote for the bill this time.

Mainor said on the House floor that reading and math proficiency in her Atlanta district was far too low, “yet some of our colleagues want to tell you that is OK.”

One Republican who opposed the measure last year didn’t vote this time. Another eight, including [Rep. Vance Smith](#), R-Pine Mountain, maintained their opposition. He didn’t appear to like the idea of parents asking taxpayers to help foot their tuition bills, noting that he and his wife sent their own three kids to private school.

“We kept working, paid that tuition. And I admit to you that tuition back then wasn’t as high as it is now,” he said. “But we worked. It was tough.”