

Forsyth Politicians Pushed Through a Voucher Bill Most Georgians Oppose

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Your tax dollars may soon go to religious and private schools with philosophies you don't support. Forsyth County politicians, Senators Greg Dolezal, Shawn Still, and Representative Todd Jones, sponsored the Georgia Promise Scholarship Act, or SB 233, which will allow our tax money to prop up private and religious institutions at the expense of public education.

Most Georgians oppose this idea, according to a recent Georgia Budget and Policy Institute poll. The bill was also unpopular among lawmakers and only passed by a single vote.

SB233 will allow students in "failing public schools," defined as schools in the bottom 25% of the state, to use \$6,500 public education dollars for private or religious schools, homeschooling, or a host of other still-to-be-determined educational expenses.

Because Forsyth County schools are so esteemed—we’re the third-best school system in the state—we don’t have any schools in the bottom 25% anyway. But that doesn’t mean that our school system won’t be affected. In states like Arizona and Florida, where school vouchers for “failing” public schools were signed into law, school choice for all soon followed. Whether or not we have students eligible for vouchers, tax money from across Georgia will be contributed toward the fund.



Advocates for school choice say it’s about putting children’s needs first. But if our lawmakers are so concerned about giving children every opportunity, why is Georgia one of only six states that don’t allocate additional money to educate the poorest students? And why did our state reject federal funding to provide meals to low-income families this summer?

Instead of giving up on failing public schools, we should strengthen them. Unlike public schools, private and religious programs don’t have to take everyone, and those from marginalized groups are most likely to be turned away.

Even with vouchers, families wanting to send their children to a private or religious school must pay more than \$5,000 annually since the average price tag is almost \$12,000 in Georgia. After a similar bill was passed in Arizona, private schools raised their tuition because of the additional funds. This means that vouchers will support the wealthiest families.

It's not surprising that studies suggest that students in voucher programs have lower average test scores since vouchers can go to unaccredited institutions that don't require the same teacher certifications as public schools.

Of course, private schools may be better for some students. In those cases, Georgia already has two school choice programs: the Special Needs Scholarship Program and the Qualified Education Expense Tax Credit Program. Funding for these initiatives increased by 883% over the past ten years, while funding for public education decreased, according to a 2023 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Over the coming weeks, politicians who pushed for this will tell us that since Georgia spends roughly \$10,000 per student in public education, losing \$6,500 per child who uses a voucher will save the school money. That oversimplifies the issue, considering schools have fixed costs like maintenance, heating and cooling classrooms, and bus repairs that can't just be cut when fewer students enter the doors.

If enough students opt for school choice, public schools will have to cope with less. This could mean increasing class sizes, limiting transportation options, or reducing teacher headcounts.

Republican politicians will also tell us that SB 233 supports public education. The truth is that to make the bill more attractive, they added some public school initiatives and teacher pay raises, which would've gotten approved through a budget bill anyway. They will also tell us that only 1% of public education money will go towards vouchers, which is still a whopping \$141 million.

The best way to support Georgia's students, teachers, and staff is to keep public education fully funded. As parents, educators, and neighbors, we ask you to raise your voices with your Georgia State Senators, House Representatives, and Governor Kemp and tell them you oppose defunding our school system through vouchers. As of this writing, the bill hasn't passed the State Senate yet, but if it does, we urge you to remember our Forsyth County politicians' role in defunding our children's public education when you cast your vote this year.

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