**Headline:** The Defeat of a School Voucher Program Reveals the Truth Within the ‘School Choice’ Debate

**Teaser:** The momentum for education savings accounts is increasing across the country, and public education advocates say they will endanger neighborhood schools.

By Sandra Jones

**Author Bio:** This article was produced by [Our Schools](https://independentmediainstitute.org/our-schools/). Sandra Jones served as an investigative reporter for nearly two decades. She has received numerous awards for her broadcast reporting.

**Source:** Our Schools

**Tags:** Education, Charter Schools, GOP/Right Wing, Democratic Party, Law, Activism, Politics, Community, Economy, Interview, Opinion, North America/United States of America, Time-Sensitive

**[Article Body:]**

When Republicans in the Virginia State Legislature renewed their proposal to enact legislation to create a new school voucher program in the state—previous attempts were vetoed by Democratic governors in 2016 and 2017—they said their effort was to “push to strengthen parental rights and expand educational opportunities,” [according to the Virginia Mercury](https://www.virginiamercury.com/2023/01/05/republican-lawmakers-revive-push-for-school-choice-legislation/). But when it came time to vote on these proposals in February 2023, a majority of Virginia lawmakers thought otherwise and [voted the school choice proposals down](https://www.virginiamercury.com/2023/02/07/education-savings-account-bills-fail-in-both-house-and-senate/).

A bill that Republican lawmakers were especially keen on, [House Bill 1508](https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?ses=231&typ=bil&val=HB1508), would have created the Virginia Education Success Account Program, which “would allow parents to set up a savings account funded with state dollars that could be used to cover educational expenses at private schools in Virginia,” the Virginia Mercury [reported](https://www.virginiamercury.com/2023/01/05/republican-lawmakers-revive-push-for-school-choice-legislation/).

The proposal is an example of a new breed of school choice laws that have been enacted in [10 states](https://www.federationforchildren.org/state-programs/) so far. The so-called education savings accounts (ESAs) essentially work like school vouchers that have long been a priority for right-wing conservatives and libertarians, according to [Our Schools reporter Peter Greene](https://buckscountybeacon.com/2023/01/school-vouchers-have-been-a-disaster-now-advocates-are-trying-to-rename-them/).

Despite the proposals for the new voucher program going down in both the Virginia House and Senate, proponents of the bill are far from discouraged, [according to a February 2023 article in the Virginia Mercury](https://www.virginiamercury.com/2023/02/07/education-savings-account-bills-fail-in-both-house-and-senate/). “I think people are still learning and getting their minds around what ESAs are and how they work and making sure that they don’t harm public schools,” [said](https://www.virginiamercury.com/2023/02/07/education-savings-account-bills-fail-in-both-house-and-senate/) Rachel Adams, director of external affairs for Americans for Prosperity Virginia, a libertarian conservative advocacy group that advocated for the bill. “We’ll be back next year doing the same thing,” she said.

But the reluctance of Virginia lawmakers to go forward with this idea shows where opposition to this form of school choice is coming from and calls into question just who these proposals would create “opportunities” for, and how they would impact local schools that the vast majority of parents choose to send their children to.

**A ‘Test-and-Punish System’**

For Kathy Beery, a retired educator with Harrisonburg City Public Schools, bringing education savings accounts to Virginia meant the exact opposite of what proponents of the new law said it would result in. “It means that children will not receive the educational opportunities that others will receive in other parts of the state,” she told Our Schools. The “other parts of the state” that Beery referred to are metropolitan areas like Richmond, where education choices are abundant, versus rural communities where education advocates believe that efforts to enact more school choice will harm the local schools they value.

Beery is a member of Virginia Educators United and a strong advocate for public education, especially for parents and kids in rural districts. “For rural communities,” she said, “the schools are the center of community connections. To lose their schools means losing sports, bands, [school] plays, and friendships that support the community.”

Beery, who has been on the front lines in the fight against public school privatization, believes that these proposals could have a detrimental impact on rural schools that are already experiencing financial stress.

“Without the needed resources, students [left in the public school system] will do poorly on state standardized tests [which makes the schools more vulnerable to] takeovers and privatization,” Beery said. She described this as a “test-and-punish system.”

Miles away in the largely rural county of Roanoke, Laura Bowman shares a similar sentiment. “This is a horrifying attempt to undermine not only public schools but [also] the entire teaching profession,” she said. Bowman described supporters of the Virginia Education Success Account Program as “monied interests [who] never let a crisis go to waste, and the recent pandemic is no exception.”

Bowman, who has served as president of the Roanoke County Council of PTAs and chairman of the Roanoke County Public Schools Parent Advisory Council, has spent more than a decade advocating for the health, safety, education, and well-being of children.

She too described Virginia’s school assessment policies as a “test-and-punish” system and added, “The results of those corporate-provided tests—not local assessments, report cards, and graduation rates—are used to give weight to the school choice argument. By focusing on the standardized test scores of students who live in under-resourced communities, the privatizers assert that public schools are the problem, not the circumstances the children in those communities live in.”

Bowman also questioned how widely applicable the new voucher program’s opportunities would be. “I live in a more rural part of Virginia,” she said. “Whether [the voucher is] $5,000 or $6,300, it isn’t going to get a student in the door of my local private schools,” for a [variety of reasons](https://www.ncpecoalition.org/ruralvouchers) (there are fewer local private schools, the cost per student is higher than in a metropolitan area with more existing school options and resources, etc.).

Bowman noted that voucher advocates who acknowledge the cost differences between tuition at high-quality private schools compared to what a voucher would cover are advocating for so-called “[microschools](https://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/models)” that allow families to pool their voucher money to form a small school with other parents. She countered, “This assumes there are adults who are able to be at home with the kids and who can, one, effectively teach kids essential ideas and skills and, two, ensure that the content is going to be centered on factual information and will help the student succeed post high school.”

While advocates for the voucher program might argue that not all private schools do a disservice to students and their communities, consider the potential harms of scaling up the known worst cases that so far have resulted from a lack of regulatory oversight that guides public schools. In January 2023, [Vice broke a shocking story](https://www.vice.com/en/article/z34ane/neo-nazi-homeschool-ohio) about an Ohio homeschool Telegram channel with “thousands of members” that “openly embraced Nazi ideology and promoted white supremacy, while proudly discouraging parents from letting their white children play with or have any contact with people of any other race. Admins and members use racist, homophobic, and antisemitic slurs without shame, and quote Hitler and other Nazi leaders daily in a channel open to the public.”

If the bill creating the Virginia Education Success Account Program had been successfully passed, would Virginia parents using this neo-Nazi homeschool network be able to have their expenses covered with public tax dollars? It’s not clear.

**A Priority for Republican Governors**

“Vouchers don’t provide an actual choice for students living in rural areas who have little, if any, access to private schools,” [according to](https://www.ncpecoalition.org/ruralvouchers) the National Coalition for Public Education (NCPE), a nationwide advocacy group that champions public schools and explicitly opposes school vouchers.

“If students are able to use a voucher, they are generally required to endure long, costly commutes,” NCPE’s website [said](https://www.ncpecoalition.org/ruralvouchers). “And, vouchers are especially harmful to the public school systems serving large rural areas because the schools are forced to spread the same costs for facilities, transportation, administration, and instruction over a smaller revenue stream.”

The potential negative impacts that new voucher programs may impose on rural schools have significant consequences for the nation’s public education system at large, NCPE’s [website](https://www.ncpecoalition.org/ruralvouchers) noted, because “[m]ore than one in four schools in America are rural and nearly one in five students attend a rural school, which is approximately 8.9 million students.”

Despite warnings from advocates about the dire consequences new voucher programs would have on rural schools, there is a growing “resurgence” in state legislatures for “school choice action,” Education Week [reported](https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/the-push-for-school-choice-is-accelerating/2023/01), especially for enacting new ESAs.

In a January 2023 Education Week [article](https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/the-push-for-school-choice-is-accelerating/2023/01) highlighting new ESAs that are expected to roll out in Iowa and Utah, Douglas Harris, director of the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice at Tulane University, said that the programs are enjoying greater popularity because “[t]he term ‘vouchers’ doesn’t poll very well… So they’re just changing the name to make it sound better.”

School voucher programs have become an especially high policy priority for Republican governors, according to the [analysis](https://www.future-ed.org/governors-education-priorities-in-their-2023-state-of-the-state-addresses/) done by FutureEd and The 74, a media outlet that is generally supportive of school choice. An article based on the analysis noted, “the school choice proposals in 15 State of the State addresses nearly all came from Republican governors. The only Democratic governor to broach the subject, Arizona’s Katie Hobbs, pledged to provide more accountability for a [broad expansion of education savings accounts](https://www.the74million.org/article/as-voters-pick-next-governor-arizona-cements-education-savings-accounts/) that her predecessor pushed through the legislature.”

In Texas, Governor Greg Abbott said in February 2023 that he “will be ‘heavily involved’ in the push for an [education savings account program](https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/types-of-school-choice/education-savings-account/#:~:text=Education%20Savings%20Accounts%20(ESAs)&text=Those%20funds%E2%80%94which%20families%20generally,customized%20learning%20services%20and%20materials.) this legislative session,” [according to the Texas Tribune](https://www.texastribune.org/2023/02/21/greg-abbott-vouchers-ken-paxton-transgender-kids/). The article noted, “Similar proposals have typically [met resistance](https://www.texastribune.org/2022/11/28/texas-school-choice-vouchers/) from a coalition of Democrats and rural GOP lawmakers.” Abbott, however, opted to cherry-pick his constituents’ opinions, saying, “Among Republican rural voters, about 80 percent support this.”

There has been no shortage of controversies surrounding the school choice debate, and the controversies surrounding these proposals are not going away.

One firefight that recently flared came from Utah where a prominent lobbyist, Allison Sorensen, executive director of Kaysville-based Education Opportunity for Every Child, who is helping to lead the effort to enact a new ESA program in that state, “was recorded saying she wants to ‘destroy public education,’” [according to KUTV](https://kutv.com/news/local/utah-school-voucher-candice-pierucci-allison-sorenson-audio-recording-twitter-education-opportunity-for-every-child-kaysville-house-bill-215-teacher-pay-raises). She later [apologized](https://www.sltrib.com/news/education/2023/01/24/utah-voucher-lobbyist-apologizes/) for her remarks, but public education proponents, including education historian [Diane Ravitch](https://dianeravitch.net/2023/01/29/utah-voucher-lobbyist-admits-she-wants-to-destroy-public-education/), called the comment an example of voucher proponents saying “the quiet part out loud.”

**‘Communities With No Schools’**

School choice proponents have confidence that their calls for ESAs will win over lawmakers, but opposition to these programs is not withering—even among Republicans. In Idaho, a Freedom in Education Savings Accounts bill that was under consideration in the legislature was ultimately defeated in the Senate. “Most Senate Republicans opposed the bill,” the Idaho Statesman [reported](https://www.idahostatesman.com/news/politics-government/state-politics/article272616367.html).

Proponents of public education continue to warn that with more resources going to ESAs and other kinds of voucher programs, there will be fewer dollars to fund community public schools, especially in rural and under-resourced communities that constantly struggle to maintain service.

“If the school choice movement has its way, and the marketplace is the only driver of schooling, there may be communities with no schools because no one is interested in operating a school in that community,” said Carol Burris, executive director of the [Network for Public Education](https://networkforpubliceducation.org/). “Or, it may be that the only school is a religious school, so if you want a secular school for your child, you will be out of luck.”

“Remember, private schools choose students,” Burris added. “Many of these schools do not [enroll](https://www.ncpecoalition.org/lose-rights) students who are LGBTQ+ or who have special needs. Parents may find they have no school options at all other than homeschooling or online schools. We can see how this story ends. Unfortunately, too few are paying attention,” she said.

Back in Virginia, Bowman is not alone in her fight for public schools.

“Vouchers take money out of the budget [meant] for public schools and route it to various recipients that include private schools and homeschooling businesses,” the Virginia Public Education Partners, a grassroots group that opposes school privatization, said in a statement sent to Our Schools. “So, public schools have less opportunity to address teacher and bus driver shortages, school maintenance, overcrowding, mental health, and safe buildings.”

“Public schools are meant to create intelligent, responsible, civically engaged citizens,” said Bowman. “They’re often the hearts of our communities, especially in rural areas of the nation. Families, faculty members, and the community regularly come together for school sporting events and school concerts,” she added. “I’d hate to see the positive community spirit surrounding my neighborhood public schools erode under misguided school voucher laws.”