Vouchers

Legislative Priority: Invest public resources effectively to advance learning for public school students.

- Oppose attempts to expand Georgia’s two existing private school voucher programs or add a third voucher program.
- Add necessary transparency and accountability requirements to the state’s current voucher programs.

Background: Georgia has two private school voucher programs: the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship and the Georgia Tax Credit Scholarship. Their combined price tag is approximately $129 million annually.

Georgia Special Needs Scholarship—Approved by General Assembly in 2007

- A traditional voucher financed with approximately $29 million in state funds.
- Directed to students with specific special education needs, served under an Individual Education Plan (IEP), and who attended a public school for one year.

Georgia Tax Credit Scholarship—Approved by General Assembly in 2008

- Funded through $100 million in tax credits issued each year by the state to people or corporations that donate to private, voucher-granting organizations, which are known as student scholarship organizations or SSOs.
- Available to all pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and first grade students regardless of previous public school attendance. Students in other grades are eligible for a tax credit voucher if they attend a public school for six weeks, have a documented case of bullying, were homeschooled, or would attend a public school identified by the state as poorly performing.

Lawmakers attempted to add a third voucher program during the 2019 legislative session with Senate Bill 173 and House Bill 301. Both aim to establish a new type of voucher: Education Savings Accounts. In addition to funding private school tuition, this type of voucher uses public funds to cover other education-related expenses including tutoring, curriculum materials and supplies, therapeutic services, and postsecondary tuition and fees. With legislator approval, both bills can move forward in the 2020 legislative session.

Need: Private school voucher programs have a poor history of fostering student learning. Evaluations of voucher programs in Louisiana, Indiana and Ohio reveal voucher students trailing their public school peers, some even losing ground. Where there have been positive outcomes, the effects have often been small and limited to specific student sub-groups, and uncertain if they are due to the vouchers or to other factors.

Neither of Georgia’s voucher programs have been evaluated though both are more than 10 years old. Lawmakers set some transparency requirements for the special needs scholarship, though additional

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information about participating students and schools is needed to enhance understanding of the program’s operations and impact. Legislators established very few reporting requirements for the tax credit voucher program. No information about participating schools is collected. Information collected about students is limited solely to their family income quartile. Legislators did not design an accountability system for either voucher program to identify participating private schools that consistently fail to meet students’ needs.

Georgia lawmakers should not expand the state’s existing voucher programs or create an Education Savings Account or other voucher program. Too little is known about the current voucher programs to allocate more of the state’s limited resources to them. In addition, legislators should bolster the transparency and accountability requirements of the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship and the Georgia Tax Credit Scholarship.
