

Universal voucher bill defeated in Tennessee, but the Governor and legislature leaders signal that they will continue the battle for vouchers next session.

For now, the Tennessee legislature has rejected a universal voucher scheme; however, the Governor and Tennessee legislature leaders are bent on passing the scheme in the future.

Voucher zealots and their legislator toadies keep soldiering on by hook or by crook until they accomplish their goal of—everyone gets a voucher. They care not about constitutional provisions or the public good.

In Texas, the Governor called four special sessions of the Texas Legislature to enact vouchers and the rural Republican legislators did not budge in their opposition. Using outside tainted money, the Governor helped defeat some of the voucher opponents in the primary election.

In Ohio, the voucher diehard, as a member of the Ohio House, began a crusade for universal vouchers two decades ago. As Senate President, he achieved his goal in July 2023 via HB33 (State Budget Bill). Now, he is continuing his holy war against the Ohio public common school by initiating the idea of funding capital projects for existing private schools and startup private schools.

Tennessee Gov. Lee admits defeat in school voucher push

By Kimberlee Kruesi and Jonathan Mattise | AP

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GALLATIN, Tenn. — Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee conceded defeat Monday in his push to enact [universal school vouchers](#) this year, acknowledging there was not a “path forward” after months of Republican infighting.

It’s a blow to school choice advocates who had hoped to add Tennessee to the growing list of states drastically expanding voucher programs with little to no income limits.

“I’m disappointed for the families that were hopeful that their child might have the opportunity to choose the right path educationally,” Lee, a Republican, told reporters. “There is broad agreement that this needs to be done. I feel confident it will be, but we couldn’t put the final pieces together this year.”

According to the National Education Association, the largest U.S. teachers union, 11 states have adopted [universal school voucher laws](#). Supporters argue that doing so gives students in low-performing schools a way out and stress that vouchers give parents more control over what their children are taught. Critics counter that whether students who change schools with the use of taxpayer money achieve better educational outcomes is in dispute.

Monday’s concession is also the latest policy loss for Lee, who over the years has struggled to wrangle the GOP legislative supermajority into supporting his top proposed initiatives. Last year, [lawmakers ignored Lee’s request](#) to enact legislation that would keep firearms away from people who could harm themselves or others following a fatal Nashville school shooting. In 2021, the governor agreed to drop talks of [expanding paid family leave](#) for state workers after a hostile reaction from lawmakers. Lee has never vetoed a bill since taking office.

Lee first [unveiled his plans](#) last fall to allow families to access public money for private schooling, regardless of income. At the time, he was surrounded by the state’s Republican legislative leaders and Arkansas GOP Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, who had signed into law a voucher proposal just that year and used the event to tout that a conservative education revolution was happening around the country.

Yet despite the initial support, Lee's vision was always considered ambitious in a state where rural GOP lawmakers have remained skeptical of losing limited public school money in their own districts and local education officials have been loudly unanimous in their opposition to any hint of vouchers.

For months, Tennessee's GOP-dominant General Assembly has been deeply divided on the details surrounding how such a statewide plan would work. Differing versions advanced in the House and Senate, but those bills ultimately stalled as legislative leaders worked behind the scenes on a deal.

As of last week, the tone inside the Tennessee Capitol had noticeably shifted as lawmakers entered into the final weeks of session and hopes of a deal began to plummet. But no one would publicly declare the bill dead, instead saying that call had to come from Lee.

Lee has since promised to renew the school voucher talks next session, though it's unclear how that attempt will fare, as some members won't be returning next year because of retirement and others are facing opponents in this year's election.

Lee hinted that he will pursue candidates who support school vouchers in the GOP primary election in August.

"I've always been engaged in primaries in the state whenever there's an election," Lee said. "But I'll certainly be talking to primary candidates about how they feel about school choice."

Notably, both House and Senate budget writers still set aside \$144 million for the voucher expansion in their spending proposals. That means that money will sit idly for nearly a year until school voucher talks can resume next January.

"Many initiatives need multiple years, or even multiple general assemblies, before they are ripe for passage," said Senate Speaker Randy McNally. "This is not an end, but a new beginning. Conversations will continue over the summer and fall, and we will revisit the issue next session with renewed purpose."

House Speaker Cameron Sexton stressed that the General Assembly had come closer to an expanded school voucher agreement than in years past.

"We will continue working until all parents have the same opportunity to use their tax dollars to choose the best school for their child," Sexton said in a statement.

Lee first asked lawmakers to consider expanding school vouchers back in 2019, when the plan was to allow parents of students in certain low-income districts with three or more schools ranked in the bottom 10% to receive \$7,300 from a government-authorized account to pay for approved expenses.

After much editing, Republicans just barely passed a program that applied only to Democratic strongholds in Davidson and Shelby counties, which encompass Nashville and Memphis. Lee's victory came as some GOP members received assurances that it would never apply to their own districts.