

Learn about the perils of “school choice” via vouchers in Arizona.

[Arizona's visceral reaction against school vouchers isn't just about vouchers | Opinion](#)

Vouchers haven't leveled the playing field for students. They've just added a new level of complexity to a funding system that's not at all based on school choice.

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Arizona Republic

- Arizona's universal school voucher program faces criticism for lax spending accountability.
- While there are calls for reform, the Republican-controlled Legislature has shown no intention of implementing them.
- The debate surrounding vouchers extends beyond funding, touching upon issues of fairness, school choice, and evolving expectations in education.

There's a lot to dislike about Arizona's universal school voucher program.

Lawmakers intentionally left the checkbook wide open on parents' expenses, for example, leading to maddening stories about [taxpayers footing the bill](#) for golf simulators, luxury watches and collector Lego sets.

This, even as Arizona ranks near the [bottom nationally](#) for per-pupil spending and teacher pay in its public schools.

But how do we stop it?

And that's the thing. We don't. Not right now, at least.

Lawmakers aren't about to reform anything

I agree that vouchers need more accountability, and not just for the [\\$1 billion that is expected](#) to be spent on them this coming year.

We know woefully little about the roughly [86,000 kids](#) who are receiving the cash. (Case in point: I spent a half-hour searching for how many of those kids attend private school or learn at home. I still don't know.)

We know even less about what they're learning.

And that makes it impossible to determine what we're really getting from our investment — other than, of course, golf simulators, Lego sets and a least a portion of private school tuition.

There have been calls since the beginning to just roll the program back to its original intent, which was to help kids with special needs get specialized services.

Gov. Katie Hobbs has proposed [regular audits](#) and [income caps](#) on who can receive state cash.

The visceral reaction isn't just about vouchers

But the Republicans who control the Legislature have no intent of doing any of that. A citizen-led initiative to peel back the expansion never made it to the ballot.

And that doesn't leave much wiggle room for changes, at least immediately.

It is important to understand why there is such a visceral reaction to the program, though.

Because it's not just about vouchers.

At its base are arguments about fairness, and of school choice, and of how changing expectations since the pandemic are also weighing down on education.

All of which — sooner or later — we'll need to address if we want to truly improve the quality of education in Arizona.

Arizona school funding doesn't match reality

The Legislature argued three years ago that universal school vouchers would be the ultimate in school choice. Families would be free to pursue whatever education option best suits their kids.

But vouchers haven't leveled the playing field.

They've just added additional complexities to a funding system that was created when nearly everyone attended the district school down the street.

Those days are long gone.

Even before universal vouchers, nearly [half of public-school students](#) in Maricopa County weren't attending their assigned district school.

Meanwhile, long-term demographic changes have begun wreaking havoc on public schools, all of which have giant buildings to fill.

They were [built big on purpose](#) when enrollment was surging, because that was the most cost-effective way to handle so many new students.

Pandemic changed our expectations

Except now, people are having fewer kids, and high housing costs make it difficult for families to live in a lot of those once fast-growing districts.

Which is why so many are now talking about [closing schools](#) and [laying off teachers](#).

And while the pandemic didn't change [what makes a good school](#) — you still need highly motivated teachers and a dynamic leader — our expectations for schools have changed.

Opinion: [The pandemic deeply hurt students. Is anyone listening?](#)

Parents want a lot more flexibility in the school day and year. They want lessons to not be so one-size-fits-all.

And there's been a general malaise since the pandemic because most schools don't meet those expectations.

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I suspect that's why there are such visceral reactions to vouchers, and such an outcry about how we're shortchanging public schools, even as many vote with their feet.

We love choice. We just don't pay for it like we do.

(This column has been updated to add new information.)