

Voucher plan is well-funded attack on public - San Antonio Express-News (TX) - August 8, 2024 - page A013
August 8, 2024 | San Antonio Express-News (TX) | David DeMatthews and David S. Knight; For the Express-News | Page A013

A recent survey suggesting most Texans support school vouchers captured headlines across the state. We caution Texans on trusting the results given the extreme amount of money pushing misleading, inaccurate and incomplete information.

Let's remember, Gov. Greg Abbott received \$6 million from Pennsylvania pro-voucher billionaire Jeffrey Yass in December and another \$4 million in April. Michigan's Betsy DeVos and her American Federation for Children PAC provided roughly \$500,000 into each of nine key Texas House races. A national pro-voucher PAC, the Club for Growth Action, as well as its affiliate Super PAC School Freedom Fund, spent roughly \$8 million on political ads targeting incumbent voucher opponents.

Other pro-voucher billionaires have played the long game to unseat Republicans opposed to vouchers. Christian conservative James Leininger spent \$2.5 million in 2006 to push out five such House Republicans. Tim Dunn, a West Texas billionaire, has invested millions over decades pushing vouchers.

Pro-voucher advocates argue parents want choice. If so, what on Earth is all this money for? The truth is vouchers, which shift public dollars to private schools, are so foreign, unpopular and problematic to Texans that it has taken a campaign of well-funded misinformation just to move the needle a bit.

A voucher war chest has been essential to punishing politicians who vote based on evidence that vouchers are harmful to kids and public schools. Researchers continue to find that students using vouchers underperform on standardized tests relative to their public school peers. A war chest is also needed to prop up vouchers as Texans learn about what happened in Arizona, where the voucher program, adopted in 2022, ballooned from \$65 million to a projected \$900 million causing a budget crisis and a need for sweeping cuts.

Informed Texans do not want expensive programs, lowering student achievement and exploding budgets, but pro-voucher advocates are betting that Texans won't cut through misinformation, especially as Abbott attacks public schools while advocating for vouchers.

We're education researchers, and we have seen voucher advocates fund or promote flawed studies that support their cause. For example, a recent study spuriously concluded that "65% of Texans

support the adoption of legislation that would provide school vouchers to all parents in Texas." But buried in the text of the 27-page report was a note indicating researchers "excluded all other responses from the analysis."

Last year, we wrote about how excluding "don't knows" was a questionable decision made by the same authors. In that study, 12% of participants who indicated that they "didn't know enough" to draw a conclusion were removed from survey findings presented in the executive summary. If you added back the "don't know" groups, most Texans surveyed did not support vouchers.

In contrast, a more transparent set of studies counting all respondents, including those who did not know or have an opinion, offered different results. The Texas Politics Project researchers found 2% of potential Republican primary voters mentioned vouchers as a key issue and 47% of all Texans supported the redirection of state tax revenue to help parents pay for private school.

Money can bury evidence, manipulate public opinion and push opportunistic politicians into promoting a failed policy that lowers student achievement and explodes budgets. But money will never change how vouchers are toxic education policy. Texans should reject them.

David DeMatthews is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy at the University of Texas at Austin. **David S. Knight** is an associate professor of education finance and policy at the University of Washington.

CITATION (APA STYLE)

DeMatthews and David S. Knight, D. (2024, August 8). Voucher plan is well-funded attack on public schools. *San Antonio Express-News (TX)*, p. A013. Available from NewsBank: Access World News: <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.baylor.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/19AD457459219FD0>.

Copyright (c), 2024, San Antonio Express-News. All Rights Reserved.