

Despite lofty promises, Louisiana's private-school vouchers fall short

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Body

School vouchers were supposed to be an academic lifeline for Louisiana's neediest children.

Under a 2012 law, the state would pay for poor students in struggling public schools to attend private or parochial schools where, it was promised, they would receive a better education.

But more than a decade since the statewide voucher program began, after Louisiana has spent half a billion taxpayer dollars to send thousands of students to private schools, data show the state's lofty promise has not panned out.

On average, voucher students at private schools fare worse on state tests than their public-school peers, according to scores examined by The Times-Picayune and The Advocate. In 2023, just 14% of voucher students in grades 3-8 met state achievement targets, compared with 23% of low-income students at public schools.

"If the goal was to improve achievement, then the program is not succeeding," said Doug Harris, an economist at Tulane University who has written about Louisiana's voucher program.

Even voucher proponents acknowledge the lackluster results.

"Louisiana is kind of famous for having one of the weakest, or maybe the weakest, private scholarship program in the country," said Ginny Gentles, a school-choice advocate and former U.S. Department of Education official, while interviewing Louisiana Superintendent of Education Cade Brumley on a podcast last year. Brumley agreed that "it's called the worst (voucher) program in the country" and "has its limitations."

The private schools that get about \$6,800 per voucher student face scant oversight. Unlike public schools, most don't receive state ratings because they enroll too few voucher students. But 30 private schools were graded last year, and nearly 80% earned Ds or Fs.

State regulations forbid F-rated private schools from enrolling new voucher students. Brumley waived that rule in recent years, allowing even the worst-performing schools to take in more students and tax dollars.

Now, Louisiana is set to pump more public money into private schools - an approach that President Donald Trump urged more states to adopt in a recent executive order.

Gov. Jeff Landry promoted the state's new LA GATOR Scholarship Program, which will pay for students to attend private school, during an event at a Catholic school. (Staff photo by John McCusker, The Times-Picayune | NOLA.com)

STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN MCCUSKER

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In March, the state will launch the LA GATOR Scholarship Program, which will cover students' tuition and other private education expenses. State officials expect it to cost nearly \$94 million next school year, more than double the annual price of vouchers.

"These kids, there's no price we won't pay to make sure they get a good quality education," Gov. Jeff Landry said while promoting the program at a Catholic school in Metairie last year.

While the scholarship program will replace vouchers, many of the same private schools already have signed up - including over 20 with D or F ratings.

"It makes absolutely no sense," said Ashana Bigard, a New Orleans public school parent and advocate. The voucher schools struggled academically, "so we're going to give them more kids?"

But proponents insist the scholarship program, which includes fewer regulations, will attract stronger schools and achieve better results than vouchers.

"I think what we learned is that a private-school choice program is only as good as the quality of the private schools that are enticed to participate," said Patrick Wolf, an education policy professor at the University of Arkansas who studied Louisiana's vouchers.

In that program, he added, the "quality level appears to have been quite low."

Early results disappoint

Louisiana first offered vouchers in the 1960s to parents fleeing school desegregation, before resurrecting them decades later as a refuge from struggling public schools.

"Parents and kids should not be trapped in a failing school," then-Gov. Bobby Jindal said when the statewide voucher program launched in 2012, adding that all children deserve "an excellent education."

Former Gov. Jindal pushed for the statewide voucher program in 2012, saying no students should be "trapped" at failing public schools. (Photo by Chris Granger, Nola.com | The Times-Picayune)

CHRIS GRANGER

One of several Republican-led states to adopt vouchers, Louisiana targeted its program to families with incomes at or below 250% of the poverty line with children in public schools rated C or lower. Participating private schools had to admit all applicants, charge no more than the voucher amount and administer the state's annual LEAP test to voucher recipients.

When researchers analyzed the results after one year, what they found was stunning: Participating in the program caused students' English and math scores to plummet.

"We're talking about some of the worst results we've ever seen in the history of education research," said Josh Cowen, an education policy professor at Michigan State University who opposes vouchers.

The low scores persisted for several years, especially in math. It was a far cry from Jindal's assertion that vouchers would give students access to an excellent education. (Jindal did not respond to a request for comment.)

Voucher proponents posited that the private schools' curriculums could be misaligned with the state tests or the program's rules could have deterred higher-performing schools from joining. Less than a third of the state's roughly 400 private schools participated in 2012, and those that did tended to be Catholic, have declining enrollment and charge low tuition.

"It was a very heavily regulated program and it tended to attract schools that were more desperate for the money," said Michael McShane, director of national research at EdChoice, a pro-voucher group.

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Advocates point to surveys showing many parents who receive vouchers are happy with their children's schools. They also say public schools improve when forced to compete with private schools for students.

Still, the early results were undeniable: Students' scores fell when they used vouchers.

"On the achievement side, it definitely wasn't a happy story," Wolf said.

Voucher schools still struggle

More than 12 years into the voucher program, the academic results have scarcely improved.

Last school year, nearly 6,000 students received vouchers, costing taxpayers \$45 million. More than 75% of those students attended private schools where fewer than 1 in 4 voucher students achieved "mastery" on the state tests, meaning they're ready for the next grade level, according to an analysis of state data by The Times-Picayune and The Advocate. At least 26% went to schools where fewer than 1 in 10 voucher students achieved mastery.

The raw scores don't show where students started academically and whether the voucher schools helped them grow. But the state's rating system tracks students' academic progress, giving schools credit for boosting student achievement even if their scores remain low.

Even by that measure, 11 of the 30 voucher schools that received ratings last year earned Fs, 12 got Ds and five earned Cs. Just two earned Bs.

Lakeside Christian Academy in Slidell posted some of the worst results last year: Fewer than 5% of its voucher students achieved mastery. The school, which enrolled 79 voucher students, earned Fs three years in a row.

Principal Buffie Singletary said voucher students typically arrive at the school far behind, with limited reading skills, making it difficult to catch them up.

"It's just really hard," she said.

Under state regulations, F-rated private schools can keep their current voucher students but may not enroll more. But Brumley used his authority as state education chief to pause that rule, saying in memos that he sought to promote stability and parental choice.

At Redemptorist St. Gerard, a Catholic school in Baton Rouge, just 8% of students who received tuition vouchers in 2024 achieved "mastery" on state tests.

STAFF PHOTO BY MICHAEL JOHNSON

The move has been a boon for schools like Redemptorist St. Gerard, a Catholic school in Baton Rouge. It earned an F in 2023, then enrolled nearly 40 new voucher students the following year, for a total of 134. In 2024, just 8% of those students achieved mastery.

School leaders did not respond to a request for comment.

Even as Brumley stopped imposing sanctions on voucher schools, he led the charge last year to adopt a stricter rating system for public schools.

Jackson Parish Schools Superintendent said if the state is going to give private schools tax dollars, they should be held to the same standards as public schools.

"You still want parents to have choice," he said, "but let's make it a fair playing field."

A new take on vouchers

Louisiana's new private-school scholarship program has been hyped as a bigger, better version of vouchers.

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At first, lower-income families will be eligible for the tax-funded scholarships, which will replace vouchers, but eventually all will be eligible. Offering private-school subsidies to all families, regardless of financial need, is a priority for Trump.

"With President Trump, we will continue working towards education freedom for all!" Landry posted on X last month.

Unlike with vouchers, private schools that participate in the scholarship program can decide which students to admit and how much to charge them. Rather than use the state test, they can choose which assessment to give students. And the schools will no longer be rated by the state.

"LA GATOR has fewer of the regulations that typically scare away high-quality schools," Wolf said.

But critics are doubtful that the top-performing private schools will enroll students with the greatest academic needs. Instead, those students will likely land at less-selective private schools with more open seats, which tend to be lower performing.

"The fact that you're getting rid of the regulations doesn't solve that problem," said Harris, the Tulane researcher.

As Landry and others set high expectations for the new scholarship program, the voucher results loom large.

Last year, as the Legislature considered a bill to establish the scholarship program, state board of education member Conrad Appel expressed misgivings to a state education official, according to an email obtained through a public records request. (In a recent interview, Appel emphasized that LA GATOR was designed to avoid the voucher program's mistakes.)

With vouchers, "we ended up taking kids from bad public schools and basically encouraging them to go to even worse private schools," he wrote. "I am afraid that the push to allow parental choice may mean a repeat of history."

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