Resolved: The North Carolina state government should shift the weight of its K-12 education funding in favor of vouchers.

“The way to improve the schools in our poorest communities is not to tear down public education, but to honestly identify and address the causes and conditions of poverty that created these educational challenges in the first place.”
— Lee Quinn, Public School Teacher in Raleigh, NC, in “School vouchers and the enemies of public education” News & Observer (August 7, 2015)

“Governments could require a minimum level of schooling financed by giving parents vouchers redeemable for a specified maximum sum per child per year.... Parents would then be free to spend this sum and any additional sum they themselves provided on purchasing educational services...”
— Milton Friedman, Professor of Economics, University of Chicago, in “Capitalism and Freedom” (1962)
USING THE BRIEF

This debate brief was prepared by The Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation. As you prepare for your debate tournament, use this brief to orient yourself with the topic and to learn some of the key arguments and evidence for and against the resolution. You are not limited to the content and arguments presented in this brief—indeed, we encourage you to think of additional arguments and find your own supporting evidence. However, you will not be successful in your debates if you stray from the intended topic of debate.
BACKGROUND

Education is one of the most important experiences in a young person’s life. Education prepares a person to navigate the world, choose goals, and find ways to achieve those goals. A good education not only pays off economically in terms of income, career success, and living standards, but also in terms of achieving happiness, mental fortitude, and self-actualization.

The Varied Purposes of Education

“The objects of this primary education determine its character & limits. These objects would be, To give to every citizen the information he needs for the transaction of his own business. To enable him to calculate for himself, and to express & preserve his ideas, his contracts & accounts in writing. To improve by reading, his morals and faculties. To understand his duties to his neighbours, & country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either. To know his rights; to exercise with order & justice those he retains; to choose with discretion the fiduciaries of those he delegates; and to notice their conduct with diligence with candor & judgment. And, in general, to observe with intelligence & faithfulness all the social relations under which he shall be placed."


The question of how best to deliver this universal good to as many young people as possible is a highly contentious issue. In many places, it is presumed that society as a whole should provide education, financed through taxes. This is the idea behind public schools, which any student can attend. In other places, people prefer private schools rather than their nearest public school and are willing and able to pay for their children to attend these private institutions.

In places where both public and private schools coexist, something called school vouchers are sometimes available. School vouchers take the money that the state would have spent on educating a student in their local public school and instead spend it on purchasing an education at either a different public school or a private school. Some—but not all—states have some sort of school voucher option available. Voucher programs exist in about 27 states.¹ North Carolina created a voucher program in 2013 called Opportunity Scholarships, which awards up to $4,200 per year for qualifying students to attend participating non-public schools. In 2017, approximately 7,000 students took part in the program, using the money they received to attend 405 different private schools across the state.

¹ Cowen and Creed. “Public School Choice and Student Achievement: Evidence From Michigan’s Interdistrict Open Enrollment System” AERA, September 2017
KEY TERMS

**Voucher**: A voucher is a certificate, check or commitment parents receive to pay for tuition so their child may attend a school of the parents’ choice, within or outside the public school system. In a voucher system, parents receive a certificate worth a certain number of dollars to spend at a school of their choice, public or private. The certificate is supplied either by the town, city, or state that they live in. Sometimes the amount on the certificate covers the full tuition of the school the family chooses. Sometimes the certificate only covers part of the tuition and the family must pay the rest. Not many states or towns have vouchers. Often, vouchers from public sources can be used at private schools. The federal government has some involvement, since the federal government pays for a share of K-12 education by paying money to states and towns for schools that the states and towns run.

**Example**: Cynthia lives in North Carolina. Her hometown has a public high school, but she would prefer to go to a nearby private school that she thinks will be a better fit for her particular interests in math and science and because they have some clubs that she would like to participate in. The private school’s tuition is $5,000 per year. The state of North Carolina is willing to give her a $4,200 voucher because the state would have spent at least that much to educate her at her hometown school. Cynthia and her family don’t have a lot of money but they are willing to pay the $800 difference so she can attend the private school rather than her hometown public school.

**Charter School**: A charter school is a public school whose leadership is given more autonomy, or freedom, than other schools. The local school board might, for example, allow a charter to focus on a specialty, such as math and science, and selectively accept students who are good in STEM. A charter school may also choose to accept students by lottery. Importantly, the charter school is treated as a public school for purposes of funding the costs of its pupils. Local students do not always get into charter schools, even if that school is in their neighborhood. States write charter school law, and some states are friendlier to charter schools than others. States such as Arizona have relatively generous charter laws. Charter schools tend to be more popular with school boards and states than vouchers. For example, Arizona has 1.1 million children in public schools, total. It has 547 charter schools with 180,000 of that 1.1 million enrolled in those charters.

**Example**: Jesse, who lives in Arizona, wants to study science. He enrolls in BASIS Scottsdale, a STEM charter, even though Jesse could attend a regular public school in Scottsdale. BASIS has a different curriculum and requires APs, whereas the regular high school offers, but does not require, APs. The teachers at BASIS usually have a master’s or Ph.D. degree in their subject, but

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often have less teaching experience or formal educational training than a public school teacher would have.

**Independent Schools:** Independent schools are private schools. A parent whose child attends an independent school effectively pays for school twice: once through their property tax to their town, school district or state, and a second time in tuition checks to the independent school their child attends. There are over 33,000 independent schools in America, making up about 25% of all U.S. schools, enrolling 5.396 million students, or 10% of U.S. school children.  

**Example:** Joseph lives in Chicago and attends the Lab School, the same private school that President Obama’s daughters attended. Joseph’s parents pay tuition to the Lab School.

**Parochial Schools:** Parochial Schools are private schools affiliated with a church or religion. There are 6,429 Catholic schools servicing almost 1.9 million students in the U.S. There are approximately 861 Jewish day schools servicing 255,000 students.

**Example:** Josephine lives in Chicago and attends St. Margaret of Scotland, a parochial school. Her parents pay tuition to the school. The curriculum at the school includes faith education.

**School funding:** Originally, towns paid for schools with property taxes. You paid your tax on your house, and that went into the school budget for your own town. In the past half century, however, state and federal governments have joined local towns in covering school spending. That means that school is also funded from the federal income tax or other taxes collected by the state and federal government. In the year 2013-14, the federal government provided approximately $55.3 billion toward K-12 public education, the equivalent of 8.7% of total K-12 revenues. State governments provided 46.2% of revenues and local governments provided 45.0% of K-12 revenues.

**School choice:** A general term to describe the chance for families to choose a school for their kids. Both voucher schools and charter schools fall into the “School Choice” category.

**Tuition:** The price one pays out-of-pocket to attend a particular school. Public schools are “free” in the sense that they do not charge tuition (as described above, they are paid for through taxes). Private schools charge tuition.

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AFFIRMATIVE ARGUMENTS

1. Vouchers empower all families to exercise choice and make decisions for their children’s education and future—even lower-income families. One of the single most important parts of parenting is making choices and decisions about your children’s education, and all of the things that accompany that experience such as the values they learn and their physical comfort and safety. The basic freedom to choose schools without major penalties is something families ought to have.

Without a voucher system, families endure serious penalties when they choose not to enroll their children in the public school system. They must pay for school twice: once via taxation, and once via tuition fees to the non-government school they choose. It can be a great stress on families as they try to determine which school district they need to live in, if they wish to send their children to a public school, and whether they can afford to do so. A system without vouchers punishes parents for trying to take an active role in their child’s education.

Without vouchers, only middle-income or higher-income families can afford to send their children to private schools. Vouchers put the same choice within reach for lower-income families. Harvard Professor Paul E. Peterson puts it this way: “I think it’s very good for low-income people to have the same choice everybody else has. Today, in this country, we have middle class families making choices as to where to live and whether or not to send their child to a private school. Low-income families don’t have that choice. Low-income families are in the worst schools. They do the least well in school. Why not put everybody on the same level playing field? Give everybody a choice, including our low-income families.”

2. Vouchers incentivize the development of newer, better educational options for families and students. As long as education is paid for mostly through taxes, and protected from competition, it will not benefit from the types of market forces that would normally incentivize educators to find ways to increase the quality and quantity of educational options and lower the cost. Vouchers are one way to introduce positive market forces to education. If students, or their families, can direct government funding to whichever institution they perceive to be the best, this creates an incentive for all sorts of educational institutions to develop. These options could resemble current forms, such as magnet or charter schools, but could also include schools designed for students with special needs, students who speak English as a second language, or other types of niche schools. The assurance that providing good quality educational options will be met with state funding via vouchers will incentivize the development of unique forms of education tailored to the needs of specific sub-groups of students.

Vouchers further incentivize good quality options because if a family is not happy with the education it is receiving at one private school, it can choose to go to a different school and “spend” the voucher there. Vouchers allow parents to hold schools accountable for the quality

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of education they provide. This is desirable because parents are in a better position than bureaucrats to determine whether the education their child is receiving is satisfactory.

3. **Vouchers produce better academic results.** The scientific way to analyze educational outcomes from vouchers is by a randomized control trial (a trial in which kids are randomly assigned to either a public school or allowed to use a voucher to attend a school that isn’t their regular district school). Then researchers can look at the results and see which set of students, i.e. the students who remain at the public schools or the students who attend a different school with a voucher, have better results. Fifteen such studies have been conducted. Twelve of the fifteen found that some or all of the students who attended schools with vouchers performed better than their peers who stayed in the old school. A good example of graduation records is a Washington, D.C. experiment where students who had been selected randomly to receive vouchers and then attended voucher schools had a 91% high school graduation rate.⁹ Those students who attended their regular school graduated at only a 70% rate. A good example of improvement in math is in Milwaukee. A study of Milwaukee voucher programs found students that used vouchers tested better in math than did control students.¹⁰

Studies generally have not found many cases in which students do worse because of vouchers. Most studies find results that are either positive or at worst neutral regarding voucher programs.¹¹ In the research paper that reviewed 15 studies, only two studies, both in Louisiana, experienced negative results with vouchers.¹²

Greg Forster, an expert at the Friedman Foundation, which favors school choice, summarizes: “Given the remarkably consistent findings of the research, it is clear school choice is having a positive effect. It is wrong to say choice must be doing no good simply because a lot of public schools are still ‘failing’ standardized tests. Claims that choice ‘does not work’ directly contradict a clear consensus in the scientific evidence.”¹³

4. **Vouchers protect religious liberty.** Many families prefer to educate their children in an environment that supports their particular religious background and trains students according to a particular view of virtue and morality. Since public schools are not allowed to take positions on religion, and since private religious schools usually charge tuition, many parents who would prefer a religious education for their children can’t access one without government assistance through vouchers or scholarships. Vouchers allow parents to use at least some of the money they pay in taxes for the type of education they would like their children to receive.

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5. **Vouchers improve public schools through competition.** Normally, public schools do not compete with other schools to attract students. Students simply attend the closest public school regardless of the quality of the school. Vouchers improve regular schools because the new need to bid for students incentivizes even the lowest quality public schools to improve.\(^\text{14}\) Vouchers improve the incentives in education because families will not want to send their children (and spend their voucher money) on schools with poor performance. Particularly in the long run, this encourages schools to improve their performance or risk losing their students (and funding), and thus keeps schools accountable and encourages them to improve.

6. **Vouchers improve public schools because some of the money stays with the public school.** Although it may appear that when vouchers are used, less money goes to public schools, vouchers actually increase public school funding on a *per student* basis. Almost all voucher programs are funded at a rate lower than the per-student rate public schools currently receive. The positive difference between the current funding and the funding under a voucher program is left with the schools the students would have attended. A public school might, for example, receive $7,000 per student from the state, and the voucher program in that state might be for up to $5,000. If a student that would have attended the public school chooses to redirect that $5,000 to a private school, the public school still receives the $2,000 difference. So although public schools might lose students, they usually don’t lose the full amount of money that was coming in for those students. (This actually puts alternative schools in the position of having to make do with less money per student than their public counterparts, or else charge students more than the amount covered by the voucher.)

7. **Vouchers are supported by the families that use them, as well as the general public.** When given the opportunity to use or apply for a voucher, many people do it. In fact, sometimes there are far more families who want vouchers than the state would like to give out, which means that vouchers are very popular. In the 1990s, the Children’s Scholarship Fund announced it would offer the equivalent of four years of vouchers in scholarship money for K-8 education and said it could give 40,000 four-year scholarships. Some 1.25 million students demonstrated their preference for the vouchers by applying for those 40,000 voucher-style scholarships.\(^\text{15}\)

Vouchers are also viewed positively by the general public and are one of the few bipartisan policy proposals that can bring the two major parties together. A national survey of 1,100 likely voters by the American Federation for Children found that school choice is supported by 63 percent of likely voters.\(^\text{16}\) As an example of a large state survey on the same topic, a poll conducted by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice and the Texas Public Policy Foundation found 66 percent of voters in Texas support school vouchers.\(^\text{17}\)

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\(^\text{15}\) “Policy Efforts” Children’s Scholarship Fund. http://www.scholarshipfund.org/about/policy-efforts/


\(^\text{17}\) “New Poll Finds Texas Voters Favor Private School Choice” Texas Public Policy. April 23, 2013
NEGATIVE ARGUMENTS

1. Vouchers are not fair because they mainly benefit middle-income and higher-income students the most, not lower-income students. Vouchers usually do not cover the full tuition of attending private school—only part of it. Thus, only families with enough money to cover the cost of the rest of the tuition can truly benefit from vouchers. Vouchers end up being a way for families that are already well off to receive money from the government that should go to everyone in the form of better public schools. Because they aren’t used by everyone equally, some critics of vouchers even go so far as to call vouchers “welfare for the rich.”

2. Vouchers take students away from public schools, undermining public schools. Vouchers siphon students away from public schools, making it more difficult for public schools to manage themselves efficiently. Public schools need to be large because they have to be able to accept any student that wishes to enroll. But with vouchers, student enrollment becomes unpredictable. The more unpredictable student enrollment is, the more difficult it is for public schools to plan efficiently in terms of resources such as classrooms, administrative staff, cafeteria and janitorial workers, and maintenance harder to manage. Many of these resources represent fixed costs that don’t vary as enrollment goes up or down, so in a year when many students opt to attend another school with a voucher, the public school is stuck with a large and expensive infrastructure that they still must pay for.

Vouchers also undermine public schools by siphoning away students to the extent that they tend to siphon away the most academically gifted students. When good students take their vouchers to alternative schools, schools that are already struggling are left with an even more concentrated set of educationally challenged students. This makes public schools look worse in terms of test scores and academic performance, and—since students also learn from their classmates—it can also negatively affect the educational environment. Once the best students start to leave, others also leave, which starts a vicious cycle of exit that may not be warranted.

3. Vouchers break down the separation of church and state by allowing state funds to support religious educational institutions. To the extent that vouchers are used by families send their children to religious schools, such as Catholic schools, vouchers violate the separation of church and state, which is a core tenet of the United States Constitution described in the First Amendment. The First Amendment states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Religious schools, many of which charge a relatively low tuition, end up attracting many students are thus receive large amounts of money from the government. In Cleveland, in the 1990s, the vast majority of students who used vouchers, (about 4,000) used them for Catholic schools. As then schools chancellor for New York Rudy Crew noted, “[t]hat kind of government

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support for religion violates the constitution of most states and also the Constitution of the United States.”

4. **Vouchers don’t necessarily lead to higher academic performance.** It is often assumed that private schools are better than public schools, but that is not necessarily true. One of the most systematic studies on voucher outcomes, conducted by Lisa Barrow of the Chicago Federal Reserve Bank and Cecilia Rouse of Princeton University, looked at vouchers in four places: Wisconsin; Washington, D.C.; Ohio; and Florida. They found that “achievement gains for students offered education vouchers” were “not statistically different from zero, meaning that those gains may have arisen by chance.” A more recent follow-up study released by the Department of Education in April 2017 looked more closely at just the voucher program in Washington, D.C., and found that voucher students performed significantly worse in math and had slightly worse reading scores.

Multiple studies of the voucher program in Louisiana have also found negative results. One study found that participation in the voucher program increased “the likelihood of a failing math score by 50 percent” and also had large negative effects on reading, science, and studies scores. Because many parents simply assume that private schools are of higher quality, some private schools ended up being oversubscribed, which contributed to lower test scores. As researchers noted, “This may reflect either lack of knowledge about achievement effects or demand for school characteristics other than academic quality, such as religious instruction or a change in peer environment.”

5. **Vouchers result in schools with less diversity.** The more that families use vouchers to sort themselves into schools where similar families also send their kids, the less diversity there is for everyone to experience. Public schools end up being less diverse as the families from higher socio-economic status go elsewhere, and private schools also end up being less diverse as they end up being made up of primarily students from higher socio-economic status (and in some cases, all the same religion).

Researchers have found that vouchers have even contributed to unintended racial segregation. A 2015 study of North Carolina charter schools found that “the state’s charter schools, which started out disproportionately serving minority students, have been serving an increasingly white student population over time. In addition, during the period, individual charter schools have become increasingly racially imbalanced, in the sense that some are serving primarily minority students and others are serving primarily white students.”

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22 Ibid.
Going to school in a homogenous environment isn’t good for anyone—not even the students in the private schools, who don’t get the opportunity to develop an awareness and appreciation of real world diversity and challenges. To always be in a school with other well-educated students similar to oneself, is to fail to experience the diversity and reality of modern America. A system without vouchers is better for diversity.

6. Vouchers stick public schools with the extra cost of educating students with disabilities and special needs. Public schools are required by law to accept and accommodate students with disabilities (including learning disabilities and physical disabilities). Most private and parochial schools are not bound by law to do the same. In fact, in North Carolina, private and religious schools are not required to serve free or reduced-price lunches, or offer transportation (i.e. busing). Some argue that using taxpayer dollars to fund schools that do not have to take all children violates the North Carolina state Constitution.24

Though it is through no fault of their own, students with disabilities are more expensive to educate. For instance, they might require additional instructors, resources, or equipment. The fact that public schools must accommodate these students while other schools do not puts public schools at a competitive disadvantage. The whole voucher model exacerbates and exploits this disadvantage by encouraging competition between schools.

7. Private schools lack accountability about academics, basic protections, and standards. Whatever their flaws, public schools have far more oversight and accountability than private schools, which are typically not monitored by the government. Almost anyone can open an independent school, regardless of their knowledge or credentials in education, which means that unqualified people could attempt to start a new school for reasons other than to provide the best education possible to students. In Florida, some private schools were found to be hiring teachers without college degrees and staff with criminal records, and falsifying fire-safety and health records.25

Curriculums and teacher requirements in independent schools vary widely. Some schools teach things that are far outside of the mainstream and that advance controversial ideas or biased views of history, literature, and other subjects. Vouchers put taxpayers in the position of financially supporting schools that they may not agree with.

The lack of academic accountability also means that families who choose to disenroll from public school and use a voucher are out on their own when it comes to judging whether a private school is of good quality, and they are potentially at risk of losing academic credit for coursework if they encounter a problem with the private school and wish to return to public school (or are asked to leave for some reason).

24 “School Vouchers” Public Schools First. https://www.publicschoolsfirstnc.org/know-the-issues/school-vouchers/
One of the arguments for school vouchers is that they are a good alternative for students who first try going to their local public school but find that their public school does not meet their needs. In some states, though, students are jumping straight to private schools with their vouchers, never even giving their public school a chance to demonstrate itself. The chart below shows that in Indiana, for example, it is increasingly the case that vouchers are being used by students who have never gone to public school in the first place.  

A majority of voucher students have not previously attended an Indiana public school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Previously attended an Indiana public school</th>
<th>No record of attending an Indiana public school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>3,626</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>7,223</td>
<td>1,916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>12,030</td>
<td>7,779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>14,446</td>
<td>14,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>15,574</td>
<td>17,112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>15,567</td>
<td>18,732</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Indiana Department of Education
Credit: Alyson Hurt and Brittany Mayo/NPR

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APPENDIX B.

Academic performance is not the only thing that parents are concerned about when evaluating a school. Factors such as physical safety are extremely important, too, and should not be overlooked. The chart below shows that parents of students who participated in the school voucher program in Washington, D.C., perceived their children's new school to be safer than the school their children had previously attended. Students also shared this perception, though to a smaller degree.  

![Figure E-3. Impacts on parent and student perceptions of school safety (percent rating school as very safe) for scholarship offer and use, in first year](image)

*Difference between the treatment group and the control group is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

NOTE: Sample size is 616 treatment group parents and 439 control group parents. The sample size is 266 treatment group students and 155 control group students.

SOURCE: Estimated means and impacts were generated from study’s regression models, as described in chapter 2. Parent and student surveys for OSP evaluation, 2013–2015.