



ATPE Input on School Choice Rollout

October 6, 2026

The **Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE)** offers the following input on the charge of examining the rollout of Texas' school choice program:

ATPE recognizes that Texas families have diverse educational needs and that parents want the ability to make decisions about their child's education. However, the demand for educational options should not be confused with evidence that publicly funded voucher programs are the best way to meet those needs, nor should the number of applications submitted during the first year of a program be the sole measure of its success. The Legislature should evaluate whether the program is delivering on its promises to families, using taxpayer dollars responsibly, and expanding on meaningful educational opportunities for students.

ATPE members, through the ATPE Legislative Program, oppose any voucher program, including a tuition tax credit, education savings account, or any other program that directs public funds to private schools, homeschools, or for-profit virtual schools. Public education funding should support a system that is accountable to taxpayers, accessible to all students, and responsible for meeting the needs of every child.

Research conducted by Our Schools Our Democracy (OSOD) and its Center for Voucher Transparency (TXCVT) raises significant questions about the implementation of SB 2 and whether the program is meeting its stated goals. These findings warrant careful consideration before the Legislature commits additional taxpayer dollars to the program.

Who is the voucher program actually serving?

The voucher program was promoted as a way to help families escape "failing" public schools and access better educational opportunities. Yet data released by the Comptroller in August 2026 revealed that approximately 70% of students in grades 1-12 awarded vouchers had not previously been enrolled in public school. Subsequent public information request data showed that 80% of the 106,142 eligible students remaining in the waitlist as of August 10 had not previously attended public school.

These findings raise fundamental questions about the program's purpose and its use of public funds. If the program was designed to help students leave struggling public schools, why are the majority of voucher recipients already enrolled in private schools or homeschooling? How many students actually left public schools to use a voucher, and how many families are receiving taxpayer subsidies for educational choices they had already made? What evidence

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does the state have that the program is improving educational outcomes for students who were already attending private schools? The Legislature should have answers to these questions before considering whether the program warrants continued investment.

What does the demand for pre-K reveal about gaps in Texas' early childhood education system?

Pre-K was the largest single grade-level group among students participating in the first year of the voucher program, accounting for approximately 11% of participants. It also generated the most applications, with more than 36,000 submitted. These numbers point to significant demand for early childhood education, but they also raise questions about why the state is relying on a voucher program to address a need that families, early childhood providers, and public schools have long asked the Legislature to help meet.

Texas public schools have demonstrated the value of early childhood education, particularly for students who are economically disadvantaged, emergent bilingual, or otherwise at risk of entering kindergarten without the foundational skills they need. Yet access to publicly funded pre-K remains limited by eligibility requirements, available program capacity, and the resources districts have to expand services.

The significant demand for pre-K through the voucher program should prompt lawmakers to examine whether Texas has a broader shortage of affordable early childhood education options. Rather than directing public funds to private pre-K providers through a voucher program, the Legislature could address this need by expanding access to high-quality public pre-K, providing districts with the resources to serve more children, and supporting partnerships with childcare providers. The state should also consider how many families using vouchers for pre-K would qualify for or benefit from a public school program if additional seats were available.

The Legislature should view the demand for pre-K as an opportunity to address a longstanding gap in Texas' educational system. Rather than treating voucher participation as proof that the program should grow, lawmakers should consider whether the same public investment could produce broader and more lasting benefits by expanding access to high-quality early childhood education through public schools.

Why have thousands of families who received voucher awards been unable to use them?

The Comptroller's August reporting showed that approximately 24% of voucher recipients had not used their awards. Reporting by the *Houston Chronicle* identified several reasons families declined or were unable to use the funding, including difficulty securing admission to a participating private school, tuition costs that remained unaffordable even with the voucher, a lack of suitable schools in their communities, insufficient special education services, and transportation challenges.

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These experiences raise important questions about whether the program is providing meaningful choices or simply creating the appearance of expanded access. How many families returned their awards because they could not find a participating school that would admit their children? How many found that the voucher amount was insufficient to cover tuition and other required costs? How many students with disabilities were unable to find a school capable of providing the services they need?

The state should also determine whether families who could not use their awards ultimately enrolled in public schools, remained in their existing schools, or pursued other options. A voucher has little value to a family if no suitable school is available, the school will not admit the student, or the remaining cost is beyond the family's means.

What accountability exists for schools receiving public funds, and how will the state measure success?

TXCVT's review of 221 voucher-accepting private schools identified barriers to access, including selective admissions practices, religious requirements, limited options for older students, a lack of special education services, and tuition costs beyond the voucher amount. Its research also highlighted the lack of publicly available information families need to evaluate participating schools.

Meanwhile, the state has not established a public accountability system for participating private schools. This leaves taxpayers and families with limited information about the educational outcomes achieved by schools receiving public funds.

The Legislature should examine what academic outcomes students are achieving through the voucher program and how those outcomes compare with their prior educational experiences. It should also determine how participating schools are using public funds, what safeguards are in place to prevent waste, fraud, and abuse, and what recourse families have when a school fails to provide promised services, denies admission, or removes a student. Without consistent reporting and meaningful accountability, the state cannot adequately evaluate whether the program is improving student outcomes or serving the interests of taxpayers.

Public funds should carry public accountability. Any entity accepting taxpayer dollars to educate Texas students should be subject to meaningful standards for financial transparency, student protections, and educational outcomes.

What is the full cost of the program, and what are the consequences for public education?

The Legislature must also consider the program's fiscal impact. Texas public schools remain responsible for being prepared to educate every student, including students with disabilities, emerging bilingual students, and students whose families cannot access or afford private alternatives. Diverting public funds to private education providers without a clear understanding of the program's outcomes or long-term costs raises concerns about the state's

ability to meet its constitutional obligation to maintain an efficient system of public free schools.

The Legislature should examine the actual cost per student who uses a voucher, how much of the program's funding subsidizes those who were already enrolled in private schools or homeschooling, and the administrative costs of operating the program. It should also assess the effects on public school districts experiencing enrollment declines and corresponding reductions in state funding. These questions are particularly important as lawmakers consider the long-term fiscal implications of expanding a program whose effectiveness has not yet been established.

ATPE recommends that the Legislature:

1. Require comprehensive, publicly accessible reporting on applications, awards, actual enrollment, opt-outs, student demographics, prior school enrollment, participating providers, expenditures, and student outcomes. The state should specifically collect any public information explaining why families do not use their awards.
2. Establish meaningful accountability requirements for any private school, homeschool provider, or private virtual school accepting public funds, including financial transparency, academic reporting, and protections for students and families comparable to those required of public schools.
3. **Reject any increase in funding for the voucher program until sufficient data are available to evaluate its effectiveness, costs, and impact on students and public schools.** The Legislature should not expand its financial commitment based on application numbers or unverified claims of success while fundamental questions about the program's implementation remain unanswered.
4. Prioritize investments in public schools, educator recruitment and retention, and student support services to ensure that all Texas families have access to high-quality educational opportunities, regardless of income or zip code.

Texas families deserve meaningful educational opportunities, and taxpayers deserve to know how their money is being spent. The first year of SB 2 has generated significant interest, but the available evidence raises important questions about who is benefiting, whether families can access the schools they want, and whether the program is delivering on its promises.

The Legislature should be careful not to mistake demand for proof of success. Until the state can demonstrate that the program is meeting its stated objectives and operating with appropriate accountability, additional funding is premature. Texas should focus its limited resources on strengthening the public schools that remain responsible for educating every student in the state.

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