

Fast-expanding voucher programs are starting to re-shape school enrollments and tuition across the nation

September 12, 2025 6:00 AM Stacey Plaisance
splaisance@tulane.edu
504-247-1420



A new study from the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice examines how universal school voucher programs are influencing private school enrollment, tuition and access across the country. (Photo by Adobe Stock)

Recent congressional legislation put in place the nation's first federal school voucher program, providing government funds to families to send their children to religious and other private schools, and support homeschooling. A new study by Tulane University researchers finds that similar programs in states across the country have so far raised private school enrollment by 3-4%, but these modest gains mask bigger

shifts ahead, including rising tuition and benefits flowing mainly to higher-income families and small, religious schools.

The new study, "[The Effects of Universal School Vouchers on Private School Tuition and Enrollment: A National Analysis](#)," was authored by Douglas Harris and Gabriel Olivier and released by Tulane University's National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice (REACH), one of the nation's leading centers studying school choice policies. The analysis focuses on 11 states that have adopted expansive, universal voucher programs, sometimes called Education Savings Accounts (ESAs), that provide funds to essentially all families with children, regardless of income, to attend almost any type of private school.

Because little public information is available about private schools, the research team had to undertake an ambitious, first-of-its-kind effort to combine multiple national data sources, allowing them to study more than half of all U.S. private schools.

The researchers drew three main conclusions:

1. Vouchers have already increased private school enrollment in participating states by 3-4%. While this might seem small, the authors identify seven reasons why the effects will likely grow substantially over time. This means that the funds are going to families who already send their children to private schools and who generally have above-average incomes.
2. The enrollment increases so far are concentrated in schools with low initial enrollments and Protestant religious schools. This suggests that interest in private schools may be driven by religion rather than other factors like academics.
3. Some of the voucher funds have also gone to private schools themselves. In response to the program, private schools have raised their tuition rates by 5-10%.

"These vouchers represent arguably the most significant change in U.S. schooling policy in the past 70 years," said Harris, who is the founding director of REACH as well as professor and chair of Tulane's Department of Economics. "This study provides some of the first evidence about how the programs are already starting to reshape schooling across the country."

The rising popularity of these programs has sparked both interest and controversy, with critics focusing on the possible negative impact on public education funding and raising of private school tuition costs. These results suggest some of those effects are starting to appear.

The authors also shed light on the private schooling options that vouchers are making more available to families, dispelling the myth that private schools look like traditional public schools and are expensive. The most common enrollment size is about 30 students and the most common tuition is \$5,000 per year. Many of these schools are not well known and operate, for example, in church basements. “These smaller and less expensive schools appear to be benefiting more from the voucher programs,” Olivier said.

This new study is the first in a series by REACH that will leverage these unusual data to explore different dimensions of vouchers and ESAs, including public school closures and effects on student achievement.

“This study provides some of the first evidence about how the programs are already starting to reshape schooling across the country.”

Douglas Harris, National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice