

Sally Young, Miriam Bowman, Dylan Dunson, Tacko Diop, Ryantony Exuma, Rohan Goyal,
Shreya Kumar

Rockefeller Leadership Fellows

10 March 2026

Educational Inequality and Texas's Voucher System

Education disparity in the United States refers to the unequal access to educational resources and opportunities based on factors like socioeconomic status, race, and geographic location. In underserved communities, schools must educate students facing poverty, housing instability, and food insecurity, while also lacking the funding to adequately provide for these students and respond effectively. Across the country, research reveals that students learn better when they have access to individualized attention, smaller classes, family support services, and special education.¹ However, children who are already under-resourced are unlikely to have access to these services.²

One clear example of educational disparity in the U.S. is the divide between public and private schools. Public schools are funded by taxpayer dollars and are required to serve all students, including students with disabilities and language barriers, and students from a range of economic backgrounds. Private schools, by contrast, are funded through tuition costs, allowing many of them to have smaller class sizes and individualized instruction. Tuition costs for private day schools in the 2024 to 2025 school year averaged \$32,251, which indicates that those with

¹ Claybourn, Clay. "Private School vs. Public School." U.S. News World Report, 19 August 2025, <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/articles/private-school-vs-public-school?edu-2294-variation-large-modal=true>.

² García, Emma, and Elaine Weiss. "Education inequalities at the school starting gate: Gaps, trends, and strategies to address them." Economic Policy Institute, 27 September 2017, <https://www.epi.org/publication/education-inequalities-at-the-school-starting-gate/>.

access to better educational resources are those who can already afford them.³ Private school students often achieve higher test scores, but evidence suggests this is the result of higher family income in general, rather than school type.⁴

School voucher systems are often presented as a solution to these education gaps, allowing lower-income students access to private school resources. However, private schools remain expensive, even with partial aid, and vouchers do not erase the larger structural disparities between wealthier and poorer families. This paper argues that educational disparity is largely due to unequal access to resources, and while voucher systems are presented as solutions to this problem, they ultimately fail to address structural inequalities and may deepen them instead.

School voucher systems are often promoted as a way to give parents more choices. However, research shows the results are more complex and sometimes problematic. One issue is that vouchers do not consistently improve academic performance.⁵ For example, the federally funded D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program showed no significant gains in reading or math three years after students enrolled. While students reported feeling safer and more satisfied, their academic results remained unchanged.⁶ Similarly, in Louisiana, a statewide voucher program had lasting negative effects on student achievement in both language arts and mathematics during the first two years after the program's statewide expansion.⁷ Thus, challenging the claim that

³ Claybourn, Clay. "Private School vs. Public School." U.S. News World Report, 19 August 2025, <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/articles/private-school-vs-public-school?edu-2294-variation-large-modal=true>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, *The Effects of School-Based Food Assistance on Educational Outcomes* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2016).

⁶ Ann Webber, Ning Rui, Roberta Garrison-Mogren, Robert B. Olsen, and Babette Gutman, "Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Three Years", *Institute of Education Sciences* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, May 2019).

⁷ Mills, Jonathan N., and Patrick J. Wold. "Vouchers in the Bayou: The Effects of the Louisiana Scholarship Program on Student Achievement After 2 Years." SagePub, Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, September 2017, <https://journals-sagepub-com.dartmouth.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdf/10.3102/0162373717693108>.

vouchers automatically improve student achievement. A 2021 meta-analysis confirmed that voucher effects vary widely and are not reliably positive, challenging the idea that vouchers are a proven solution for education.⁸ The second concern involves fairness and the use of public funds. Recent national studies on universal voucher programs indicate that much of the public money goes to families already enrolled in private schools rather than expanding access for disadvantaged students.⁹ Additionally, rising tuition costs in voucher states raise concerns that subsidies may inflate prices rather than making private education more affordable for more families. Vouchers can weaken public accountability.¹⁰ The United States Government Accountability Office found that the D.C. voucher system had oversight issues, including limited information for families about participating schools and weak monitoring systems.¹¹ This nationwide neglect suggests that school voucher programs may divert public funds without reliably improving student achievement.

Addressing educational inequality requires policies that target the structural causes of unequal school resources rather than diverting public funding into voucher systems. One important reform is reducing the reliance on local property taxes to fund public schools. In states such as Texas, property-based funding allows wealthier districts to generate significantly more revenue than districts serving low-income communities. This leads to disparities in class sizes, course offerings, and access to academic support services. A more equitable funding system

⁸ M. Danish Shakeel, Kaitlin P Anderson, and Patrick J Wolf. “The Participant Effects of Private School Vouchers around the Globe: A Meta-Analytic and Systematic Review.” *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* (ABINGDON) 32, no. 4 (2021): 509–42.

⁹ Harris, Douglas N., and Gabriel Olivier. “The Effects of Universal School Vouchers on Private School Tuition and Enrollment: A National Analysis.” National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice, 11 September 2025, <https://reachcentered.org/publications/the-effects-of-universal-school-vouchers-on-private-school-tuition-and-enrollment-a-national-analysis>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office. “Actions Needed to Address Weaknesses in Administration and Oversight.” 30 September 2013, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-13-805>.

would allocate additional state resources to districts with higher concentrations of poverty, English language learners, and students with disabilities. Weighted student funding models, which provide greater per-pupil funding for students with greater needs, would allow under-resourced schools to hire more teachers, reduce class sizes, and expand individualized academic support.

These voucher systems are highly controversial in Texas. Proponents argue that vouchers will increase school choice for many, potentially increasing social mobility. However, opponents argue that these taxpayer-funded vouchers are actually increasing leverage for private schools, which get the power to choose which students to admit while only covering a fraction of total tuition for those they give aid to. Additionally, private schools are not required to comply with any state accountability standards, reducing the power of locally elected boards and leaving parents with less oversight. Additionally, this voucher system is largely unrealistic for the nearly 950,000 Texas students who live in rural communities, where private options are virtually nonexistent. These instances make it clear the potential that the voucher system has to actually increase inequality, as vital funds are drained away from local public schools and effectively towards private schools. The voucher systems and diversion of funds undermine the public school systems that have the ability to offer a wealth of established choices, including magnet programs, career and technical education programs, and multilingual immersion.¹²

Policymakers should invest directly in programs that address learning gaps in under-resourced schools. Research shows that targeted interventions such as early literacy programs, extended learning time, and high-dosage tutoring can significantly improve student

¹² TASB. “Public Schools, Not Vouchers, Offer the Most School Choice.” TASB, 19 October 2023, <https://www.tasb.org/news-insights/public-schools-offer-the-most-school-choice>.

performance in reading and mathematics.¹³ High-dosage tutoring programs, where students receive consistent small-group or one-on-one instruction, have demonstrated particularly strong results in improving academic outcomes. Directing public funds toward these evidence-based programs within public schools would provide meaningful academic support for students who face the greatest educational disadvantages.

Reducing educational inequality also requires addressing the social conditions that influence students' ability to learn. Many students in underserved communities experience challenges such as food insecurity, housing instability, and limited access to healthcare, which can affect attendance and academic performance. Community school models offer one solution by integrating social services directly into schools. These programs partner with local organizations to provide mental health counseling, healthcare services, and family support resources. Evidence from several U.S. cities shows that community school initiatives improve student attendance, engagement, and academic outcomes by addressing barriers to learning outside the classroom.¹⁴

Teacher recruitment and retention policies are another key component of reducing educational disparities. Schools serving low-income communities often experience higher teacher turnover and difficulty attracting experienced educators. Policies such as salary incentives, student loan forgiveness programs for teachers in underserved districts, and expanded professional development opportunities can help stabilize the teaching workforce.¹⁵ Stronger teacher retention ensures more consistent instruction and better learning environments for students. Ultimately, reducing educational inequality requires sustained investment in public

¹³ Matthew A. Kraft and Grace T. Falken, "A Blueprint for Scaling Tutoring and Mentoring Across Public Schools," *AERA Open* 7 (2021).

¹⁴ Anna Maier, Julia Daniel, Jeannie Oakes, and Livia Lam, *Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of the Evidence* (Palo Alto: Learning Policy Institute, 2017).

¹⁵ Anne Podolsky, Tara Kini, and Linda Darling-Hammond, "Strategies for Attracting and Retaining Educators: What Does the Evidence Say?" *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 27, no. 38 (2019).

schools and the communities they serve. Rather than expanding voucher programs that divert public funds into private education, policymakers should focus on strengthening the public education system so that all students have access to the resources and support necessary for academic success.¹⁶

It is not a question of whether inequity exists in Texas's public education system; instead, it is a question of how to combat this issue effectively. While school voucher systems appear superficially promising, digging deeper reveals that these programs ultimately perpetuate the very inequities that they allege to resolve. Voucher systems increase the economic, geographic, and social barriers that public school students face by failing to offer assistance to those who need it most. Instead of subsidizing more students' entry to private school systems, policymakers should focus on the root cause of the issue by investing this same funding into classroom support and resources, teacher salaries, and per-pupil spending. Public education is and has been a tenet of American democracy. It has the potential to empower and transform the next generations of American leaders and citizens. This is a system that policymakers should not turn their backs on by investing in school vouchers. It is one they should instead find ways to strengthen, uplift, and rebuild in a way that guarantees a fair, high-quality education for all students. The solution exists in rebuilding upon the foundation we have already established.

¹⁶ Martin Carnoy, *School Vouchers Are Not a Proven Strategy for Improving Student Achievement* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2017).

Bibliography

- Aldeman, Chad. "There Really Was a 'Mississippi Miracle' in Reading. States Should Learn From It." *The 74 Million*, February 25, 2025.
<https://www.the74million.org/article/there-really-was-a-mississippi-miracle-in-reading-states-should-learn-from-it/>.
- Carnoy, Martin, *School Vouchers Are Not a Proven Strategy for Improving Student Achievement* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2017).
- Claybourn, Clay. "Private School vs. Public School." U.S. News World Report, 19 August 2025,
<https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/articles/private-school-vs-public-school?edu-2294-variation-large-modal=true>.
- Danish Shakeel, M., Kaitlin P Anderson, and Patrick J Wolf. "The Participant Effects of Private School Vouchers around the Globe: A Meta-Analytic and Systematic Review." *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* (ABINGDON) 32, no. 4 (2021): 509–42.
- García, Emma, and Elaine Weiss. "Education inequalities at the school starting gate: Gaps, trends, and strategies to address them." Economic Policy Institute, 27 September 2017,
<https://www.epi.org/publication/education-inequalities-at-the-school-starting-gate/>.
- Harris, Douglas N., and Gabriel Olivier. "The Effects of Universal School Vouchers on Private School Tuition and Enrollment: A National Analysis." National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice, 11 September 2025,
<https://reachcentered.org/publications/the-effects-of-universal-school-vouchers-on-private-school-tuition-and-enrollment-a-national-analysis>.
- Kraft, Matthew A., and Grace T. Falken, "A Blueprint for Scaling Tutoring and Mentoring Across Public Schools," *AERA Open* 7 (2021).

Maier, Anna, Julia Daniel, Jeannie Oakes, and Livia Lam, *Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of the Evidence* (Palo Alto: Learning Policy Institute, 2017).

Mills, Jonathan N., and Patrick J. Wold. “Vouchers in the Bayou: The Effects of the Louisiana Scholarship Program on Student Achievement After 2 Years.” SagePub, Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, September 2017,
<https://journals-sagepub-com.dartmouth.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdf/10.3102/0162373717693108>.

Podolsky, Anne, Tara Kini, and Linda Darling-Hammond, “Strategies for Attracting and Retaining Educators: What Does the Evidence Say?” *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 27, no. 38 (2019).

TASB. “Public Schools, Not Vouchers, Offer the Most School Choice.” TASB, 19 October 2023,
<https://www.tasb.org/news-insights/public-schools-offer-the-most-school-choice>.

U.S. Government Accountability Office. “Actions Needed to Address Weaknesses in Administration and Oversight.” 30 September 2013,
<https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-13-805>.

Webber, Ann, Ning Rui, Roberta Garrison-Mogren, Robert B. Olsen, and Babette Gutman, “Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Three Years”, *Institute of Education Sciences* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, May 2019).