

Opponent Testimony of SB 83 for the Senate Education Committee
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Senator Baumgardner, Senator Erickson, and Members of the Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony on SB 83, currently under your consideration.

My name is Josh Cowen, I'm a Professor of Education Policy at Michigan State University. I began studying school vouchers in 2002, and in addition to my work at Michigan State I currently serve as the Research Director for Oversight and Planning at the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice, which is an R&D center funded by the U.S. Department of Education. I also serve on the Research Advisory Board for the congressionally mandated evaluation of the federally funded Washington, D.C. Opportunity Scholarship (Voucher) program.

I should note that I speak only for myself and my years of experience and not the institutions I name above.

Beyond school choice I've worked with state agencies all over the country to understand what works and why in education. Basically, I'm a program evaluator and I'll be as succinct as I can today.

Twenty years of independent research and evaluation—especially from the last decade—show **devastating academic harm** to children in voucher programs that have been scaled up to statewide or universal status.¹ In mathematical terms: between -0.15 and -0.50 standard deviations of learning loss. There are several ways we can benchmark those harmful impacts but unfortunately the best recent comparison is what COVID19 did to test scores. Hurricane Katrina's impact on academics for kids in New Orleans would be another comparable estimate. There've been a couple of indications that graduation rates for voucher may improve as a result, but nothing to offset the kind of academic learning loss we've seen across these programs.

Vouchers tend to primarily fund children **already in private schools**—roughly 2/3 to 75%² of users in new and expanded programs were never in public school—and vouchers routinely come in far over budget compared to what advocates project.³ I am aware that current Kansas law does require voucher participants to have at least one year of public school time first, but that provision will begin to necessarily unravel with the new bill as the program is extended to new Kansas students and other qualifiers. The point here is that very quickly under the current legislation, Kansas taxpayers will be asked to effectively stand-up two sectors of education—something that no state has yet been able to afford without coming in well off or over budget.

The data also indicate that kids using vouchers have **very high turnover rates**—something like 20% of kids leave these programs every year—and tend to do better once they do.⁴ Part of the problem is that when vouchers are created—and especially when they expand beyond an initial plan—a new group of private schools pops up to receive taxpayer funds. These tend to be similar to **sub-prime mortgage lenders**, often with very little experience actually educating kids. In Wisconsin, 40% of these voucher schools have failed and closed their doors over time.⁵ The higher quality schools tend

not to participate in voucher programs, and when they do they have very little room for those kids. That's partly because no matter what they tell pollsters, data from school applications show that most parents still prioritize academic outcomes over everything else and there are just not enough effective private schools to go around.⁶

Finally, I want to say something about **oversight**. And not just because that's what I've done with my professional career. Whether or not this bill passes it's critical that the bill contain basic and routine oversight provisions. These should include especially 1.) requirements that schools taking taxpayer funds through the voucher system **report annual academic progress** on the state exam—just like traditional public schools do—and 2.) a basic process for **financial disclosure** on anything that affects student life such as tuition, supplies, instructor credentialing and salaries and school facilities. Finally, there should be 3.) a simple disclosure **process for admissions criteria and rejection**. If state law will permit tax-supported private schools and other providers to deny admission to, say, LGBTQ or special needs children based respectively on schools' creed or values or capacity, the state should at least require that school to say so forthrightly on a public and transparent document.

We know that when this kind of basic oversight is put in place, outcomes for voucher kids do improve, so long-term success for the program will partly depend on annual check-up.⁷

Those are my concerns, and that's what the evidence says: vouchers fund mostly kids who are already in private school. There's enormous academic loss for kids who do use them to transfer. They have high exit rates and high school failure rates. There's usually not enough room in high quality private schools for kids to use a voucher. And oversight—above all, real transparency—is key to optimal voucher performance. And that's ultimately good for kids.

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²Paul, K. M., Legan, N. A., & Metcalf, K. K. (2007). Differential entry into a voucher program: A longitudinal examination of families who apply to and enroll in the Cleveland scholarship and tutoring program. *Education and Urban Society*, 39(2), 223-243.

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³ <https://www.sosaznetwork.org/2022/arizona-voucher-program-grows-by-400-stripping-300-million-from-az-public-schools/>

⁴ Carlson, D., Cowen, J. M., & Fleming, D. J. (2013). Life after vouchers: What happens to students who leave private schools for the traditional public sector?. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 35(2), 179-199; Cowen, J. M., Fleming, D. J., Witte, J. F., & Wolf, P. J. (2012). Going public: Who leaves a large, longstanding, and widely available urban voucher program?. *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(2), 231-256

⁵ Ford, M. R. (2016). Funding impermanence: quantifying the public funds sent to closed schools in the nation's first urban school voucher program. *Public Administration Quarterly*, 882-912

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⁶ Glazerman, S., & Dotter, D. (2017). Market signals: Evidence on the determinants and consequences of school choice from a citywide lottery. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(4), 593-619; Lincove, J. A., Cowen, J. M., & Imbrogno, J. P. (2018). What's in your portfolio? How parents rank traditional public, private, and charter schools in post-Katrina New Orleans' citywide system of school choice. *Education Finance and Policy*, 13(2), 194-226; Lincove, J. A., Valant, J., & Cowen, J. M. (2018). You can't always get what you want: Capacity constraints in a choice-based school system. *Economics of Education Review*, 67, 94-109

⁷ Carlson, D. E., Cowen, J. M., & Fleming, D. J. (2014). Third-party governance and performance measurement: A case study of publicly funded private school vouchers. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 24(4), 897-922

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