



# **STRINGS ATTACHED**

**THE CONSERVATIVE CASE AGAINST  
TENNESSEE'S SCHOOL VOUCHER EXPANSION**

**GARY HUMBLE**

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THE TENNESSEE STANDS FOUNDATION

### **Strings Attached**

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# CONTENTS

Introduction	V
1. Understanding the True Nature of School Vouchers	1
2. The Financial Burden on Tennessee Taxpayers	5
3. The Regulatory Trojan Horse	9
4. The Myth of Increased Choice	19
5. The Failed Promise of Competition	25
6. Conservative Solutions for Education	29
Conclusion	35



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## INTRODUCTION

As conservatives, we understand that good intentions alone don't justify expanding government power or creating new entitlement programs. Yet that's exactly what Tennessee faces with Governor Bill Lee's proposed universal school voucher program – an expansion of government wrapped in the appealing language of "choice" and "freedom."

The promise sounds attractive: Parents would be given \$7,075 per child to spend on private education, expanding options beyond the public school system. Proponents claim this money represents "your tax dollars coming back to you." They argue that injecting market forces into education through "school choice" will improve outcomes for all students through competition.

However, as this analysis will show, these claims don't withstand scrutiny from authentic conservative principles. The proposed voucher program represents a staggering new financial burden on Tennessee taxpayers. In its first year alone, the program would cost over \$400 million – including \$140 million for vouchers, another \$140 million in continued funding to public schools for students they no longer serve (through a deceptive "do no harm" clause)<sup>1</sup>, and millions more in \$2,000 bonuses to

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1. Johnson, Sen. Jack. *Senate Bill 1 – 114th General Assembly, State of Tennessee*. Section 3. Filed 6 Nov 2024.

every public school teacher in Tennessee. (Johnson, Section 4) This bonus program appears designed for one purpose: buying support for an expensive new entitlement program from the very educators who should be most concerned about its impact.

This massive expansion of spending would occur in a state where education already consumes 40% of the current budget.<sup>2</sup> Rather than returning tax dollars, it represents a new form of wealth redistribution – taking money from all taxpayers to subsidize the private education choices of a select few, while forcing taxpayers to pay twice for students who leave the public system.

More troubling still is the program's threat to genuine educational freedom. History shows that government funding inevitably leads to government control. When private schools and homeschool families accept public money, they open the door to escalating regulation that can strip away the very independence that makes them successful. We've already seen this pattern play out in states like Florida, where voucher programs came packaged with mandated testing, curriculum oversight, and "choice navigators" to monitor participating families.

Tennessee's pilot voucher program in three counties serves as a warning. Despite promises of transformative results, the program's outcomes have been lackluster. Recent test scores show ESA students performing no better—and in some cases worse—than their public school peers. Yet rather than learn from these disappointing results, Governor Lee proposes to expand this failing model statewide at an unprecedented cost to taxpayers.

This analysis will demonstrate why authentic conservatives should oppose this expansion of government power into private education. We'll examine the program's true costs, its threat to educational liberty, and the hollow nature of its promises.

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2. Tennessee, State of. *The Budget: Fiscal Year 2024-2025*. pg. A-6.

Most importantly, we'll explore how we can actually expand educational opportunities without compromising conservative principles or surrendering private schools to government control.

The stakes are high. Once government funding enters private education, it becomes nearly impossible to extract. The time to stop this Trojan horse is before it enters the gates. Let's examine why Tennessee's proposed voucher program represents not a path to educational freedom but rather a threat to the very independence that makes private education work – all at a staggering cost to Tennessee taxpayers.



## UNDERSTANDING THE TRUE NATURE OF SCHOOL VOUCHERS

The proponents of Tennessee's school voucher program frequently claim they're simply "returning tax dollars to families." This talking point, while politically appealing, fundamentally misrepresents both how tax funding works and the program's actual impact on Tennessee communities. To understand why this program represents wealth redistribution rather than tax refunds, we need to examine several key factors.

First, let's address a basic reality: Once tax dollars enter government coffers, they cease to be "your money." These funds become public resources, managed by elected representatives for public purposes. When government returns money to individuals through programs like the proposed Education Savings Accounts (ESAs), these aren't refunds – they're new government benefits, complete with strings attached and bureaucratic oversight.

But the wealth redistribution aspect becomes even more stark when we examine the program's geographic impact. According to a comprehensive analysis by *The Tennessean*, 51 of Tennessee's 95 counties—more than half—have no private schools

that would qualify to accept these vouchers.<sup>1</sup> This means taxpayers in these counties would be forced to fund an education program they cannot access physically. Their tax dollars would be redistributed to subsidize private education in other, typically wealthier, and more urban counties.

Consider the impact on a family in rural Tennessee. They'll pay taxes to support this \$400+ million program but have no practical way to benefit from it. Their local public schools will lose funding to support students leaving public schools in other counties, while their own educational options remain unchanged. This isn't school choice – it's a transfer of wealth from rural to urban areas.

Even in counties with private school options, the distribution remains uneven. More than 90% of Tennessee counties would have five or fewer private schools that could participate in the program. (Wegner) The vast majority of qualifying private schools are concentrated in just a few urban areas, primarily around Nashville, Memphis, Knoxville, and Chattanooga. This creates a two-tiered system where rural taxpayers subsidize urban private education.

The program's structure as a *state and local public benefit* further highlights its redistributive nature. This isn't simply about "choice" - it's a government program that takes tax dollars from all Tennesseans, regardless of their income level or location, and redistributes those funds to provide private education subsidies. While there's nothing inherently wrong with a private charity helping low-income families access private education, conservatives have long opposed using government power to redistribute wealth through entitlement programs.

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1. Wegner, Rachel. "Tennessee voucher debate: Where are private schools, and how much is tuition?" *The Tennessean*. 6 Jan 2025. <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/education/2025/01/06/tennessee-vouchers-private-school-tuition-location/76367415007/>

This becomes especially problematic when we consider geographic inequities. A family in Maury County or Jefferson County may pay substantial property and sales taxes, only to see those education dollars redirected to fund private school vouchers in urban centers—vouchers they may never be able to use due to income caps or a lack of participating schools in their area. Meanwhile, families in Tennessee's 51 counties without qualifying private schools are completely shut out from the program they're being forced to fund.

The governor's proposal represents exactly the kind of wealth redistribution scheme that conservatives typically oppose. It takes money from all Tennesseans and redistributes it through a complex bureaucratic system that primarily benefits urban areas while leaving rural communities behind. This isn't market-based reform – it's government expansion masquerading as educational choice.

Moreover, the program's structure guarantees that public schools will continue receiving funding for students they no longer serve, while also funding those same students' private education. This "double-dipping" approach means Tennessee taxpayers will effectively pay twice for each student who leaves the public system – a level of government waste that no fiscal conservative should support.

This isn't about returning tax dollars or expanding choice – it's about creating a new government entitlement program that redistributes wealth while threatening the independence of private education.



## **THE FINANCIAL BURDEN ON TENNESSEE TAXPAYERS**

**W**hen Governor Lee's administration first introduced their universal school choice proposal, they emphasized a \$140 million price tag for the voucher portion. However, this figure severely understates the actual cost to Tennessee taxpayers. Let's examine the actual financial implications of this program and learn from other states' experiences with similar initiatives.

The program's real cost in its first year would exceed \$400 million, broken down as follows:

- \$140 million for the initial 20,000 ESA vouchers
- \$140 million in continued funding to public schools for students they no longer serve (through the "do no harm" clause)
- Approximately \$130 million for one-time \$2,000 bonuses to all public school teachers
- Additional administrative costs for managing the new program

This represents a massive new financial commitment. More concerning still, Tennessee already spends 70% of its total budget on education and social services combined.<sup>1</sup> Adding another major entitlement program threatens our state's fiscal stability and conservative budgeting principles.

Arizona's experience with universal ESAs serves as a cautionary tale. After implementing a similar program, the state discovered that its costs far exceeded initial projections. In late 2023, the Arizona Republic reported that the ESA program was over budget by hundreds of millions of dollars in its first year, forcing the state to pull money from other areas of the budget to cover the shortfall.<sup>2</sup>

What makes these programs particularly expensive is their tendency to subsidize private education for families who were already paying for it themselves. In Arizona, roughly 80% of new ESA recipients had never attended public school, meaning the state took on substantial new costs without any offsetting savings in the public system.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most discussed aspects of the proposed legislation is its "do no harm" funding provision. However, there appears to be some confusion - even amongst state leadership - about how this provision would actually work.

"...and ensuring that state funding to school districts will never decrease due to student disen-

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1. Tennessee, State of. *The Budget: Fiscal Year 2024-2025*. pg. A-6.

2. Hager, Eli. "School vouchers intended to save taxpayer money blew a massive hole in Arizona's budget." *Arizona Republic*. 23 July 2024. <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona-education/2024/07/23/arizona-school-vouchers-budget-meltdown/74481939007/>

3. Grand Canyon Institute. *Policy Paper — Universal Voucher Applications Analysis*. 6 Nov 2022. pg. 4.

rollment. No public school district will lose resources as a result of the Education Freedom Act. In fact, they'll get more."

Governor Bill Lee

Governor Lee has publicly suggested that public schools would continue receiving funding for ESA students indefinitely.<sup>4</sup> However, the actual bill language indicates something quite different. Legislative sponsors have clarified that the provision only protects public school funding for the first year after a student transfers to the ESA program. After that initial year, the TISA formula would adjust based on actual public school attendance.

This discrepancy between the Governor's statements and the bill's language raises several concerns. First, if the Governor's interpretation prevails, the program's costs could balloon far beyond initial projections through ongoing duplicate payments. Conversely, if the legislative sponsors' interpretation is correct, public schools would face a one-year delay in funding adjustments for each departing student - still creating temporary duplicate payments, but not the permanent double funding some have feared.

Either scenario creates significant new costs for Tennessee taxpayers. Under the legislative interpretation, the state would still pay twice for each ESA student during their first year in the program - once through the ESA and once through continued public school funding. While less costly than permanent double

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4. Lee, Bill. "Education Freedom Act gives parents choice, protects public schools | Opinion." *The Tennessean*. 7 Jan 2025. <https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/contributors/2025/01/07/tennessee-governor-bill-lee-education-freedom-act/77495353007/>

payments, this still represents a substantial new financial burden on state resources.

The program's costs are likely to grow substantially over time:

1. The bill requires adding 5,000 additional vouchers any year the program reaches 75% of capacity
2. Rising private school tuition will likely lead to pressure for larger voucher amounts
3. Administrative costs will grow as the program expands
4. The "do no harm" funding guarantee to public schools creates duplicate payments for current education costs

Conservative financial analysts should be particularly concerned about how this program could impact Tennessee's ability to maintain its reputation for fiscal responsibility. The state's current balanced budget and low debt levels could be threatened by this massive new entitlement program.

Instead of creating an expensive new government program, conservatives should support market-based solutions that don't burden taxpayers or expand state bureaucracy. The current proposal represents precisely the kind of unfunded liability and government expansion that fiscal conservatives have long opposed.

The expansion of similar programs in other states has shown that initial cost projections often underestimate the true long-term financial burden on taxpayers. Tennessee would do well to carefully consider these lessons before creating a costly new entitlement program that future generations of taxpayers will be forced to fund.

## THE REGULATORY TROJAN HORSE

When government funding enters private education, regulations inevitably follow. While Governor Lee's voucher proposal currently promises autonomy for private schools, history shows that such promises rarely survive once public money is involved. To understand the threat this program poses to educational independence, particularly religious education, we must examine both historical precedents and current warning signs.

### **The Historical Pattern**

The path from government funding to government control follows a predictable pattern. Sweden's experience offers one of the starkest warnings about how quickly educational independence can be lost. Their universal "school choice" program, implemented in 1992, initially promised complete autonomy for private schools. The program appeared successful at first, with private schools maintaining their independence while receiving public funds.

However, within two decades, the Swedish government had effectively nationalized all schools accepting public funds.<sup>1</sup> Private schools were required to teach the government curriculum, participate in national testing, and even cease religious instruction during school hours. Most troublingly, homeschooling was banned entirely, forcing some families to flee the country to maintain educational freedom. What began as a promise of "choice" ended with the elimination of genuine educational alternatives.

Canada's experience with funding religious schools provides another cautionary tale. Despite initial promises of religious liberty, publicly funded Catholic and Protestant schools now face mandatory LGBT curriculum requirements that directly conflict with their religious teachings.<sup>2</sup> This demonstrates how government funding can eventually force religious institutions to choose between their principles and their financial survival.

These aren't isolated examples but represent a consistent pattern: government funding initially comes with minimal strings attached, but those strings multiply over time until they become chains. The initial promises of autonomy give way to increasing regulation as government asserts control over the education it funds.

While voucher proponents might argue "it can't happen here," Tennessee's current proposal already contains concerning regulatory requirements. As we'll examine in the following sections, the mechanisms for expanding these regulations are built

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1. Wennström, Johan (2020). "Marketized Education: How Regulatory Failure Undermined the Swedish School System". *Journal of Education Policy*, 35(5), 665–691.

2. Jones, Kevin. "Catholic school district in Canada mandates LGBT Pride Month awareness, staff training." *Catholic News Agency*. 9 May 2021. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/247585/catholic-school-district-in-canada-mandates-lgbt-pride-month-awareness-staff-training>

into the current bill, waiting to be activated through administrative rulemaking.

## **Current Warning Signs in Tennessee's Proposal**

Proponents emphasize private school independence, but the current bill already includes concerning regulatory requirements:

- Mandatory state testing for grades 3-11
- Required reporting of student data to state authorities
- Compliance with state-established "requirements" for various educational services
- Future rules to be determined by the Department of Education

Most troublingly, **these regulations can be expanded through administrative rulemaking without requiring new legislation.** The department could impose additional requirements at any time through the rule promulgation process.

## **The Hidden Threat of Administrative Rulemaking**

While much attention focuses on the legislative text of the voucher bill, many of the most significant regulations will come through a process most Tennesseans never see: administrative rulemaking. Understanding this process reveals how private schools could face increasingly burdensome regulations with little public oversight or resistance.

When the legislature passes a law, they often delegate the details of implementation to state agencies, in this case, the De-

partment of Education. The department then creates specific rules and requirements through a process called "rule promulgation." While this process technically includes public comment periods, these administrative proceedings receive far less attention than legislative debates and often occur months or years after the original bill's passage.

The current voucher bill explicitly authorizes the Department of Education to promulgate rules in several key areas. For example, the bill states that tutoring services must "meet the requirements established by the department." Similarly, technology purchases, afterschool programs, transportation services, and educational therapy must all comply with yet-to-be-determined departmental requirements.

This means that by voting for this bill, legislators are essentially signing a blank check for future regulations. The Department of Education could later:

- Mandate specific curriculum requirements for tutoring services
- Establish detailed standards for educational technology
- Impose reporting requirements for transportation services
- Create certification requirements for educational therapy providers
- Require specific testing beyond what's currently outlined
- Establish detailed financial reporting requirements

These rules can be modified or expanded multiple times per year through the Government Operations Committee, without requiring new legislation or significant public debate. Once private schools become dependent on voucher funding, they'll find themselves forced to comply with whatever new requirements emerge through this administrative process.

Consider this real-world scenario: A private school adapts its budget to rely on voucher students, only to learn six months later that the Department of Education has promulgated new rules requiring expensive technology upgrades, additional staff certifications, or curriculum modifications. The school must either comply with these unexpected requirements or risk losing the funding it has now built into its operating budget.

This regulatory creep through administrative rulemaking has already impacted private schools in other states. In Florida, for instance, private schools accepting vouchers have faced increasingly detailed requirements about everything from teacher qualifications to student assessment methods - all implemented through departmental rulemaking rather than legislative action.

The timing of these regulations is particularly concerning. While the bill is being debated, advocates can claim it preserves private school autonomy because the more burdensome regulations have yet to be written. By the time those regulations emerge through the rulemaking process, public attention will have moved on, and schools will find themselves too financially dependent on the program to effectively resist new requirements.

This process of gradual regulatory expansion through administrative rulemaking represents one of the most insidious threats to private education autonomy. While dramatic legislative changes might face public resistance, the slow accumulation of administrative rules can fundamentally transform private education with little public awareness or debate.

## Increased Regulations Breed Lower Quality Private Schools

Corey DeAngelis, the self-proclaimed *school choice evangelist* who was recently disgraced for reportedly participating in gay porn videos,<sup>3</sup> has dismissed legitimate concerns about the regulatory strings attached to voucher programs. He's accused opponents of fearmongering, claiming that worries about increased regulations on private schools are baseless. Yet, a 2018 article he authored<sup>4</sup> for the Cato Institute tells a very different story.

In that article, DeAngelis openly acknowledged that high-quality private schools often avoid participating in voucher programs because of the “burdensome government regulations” attached to them. He noted that these schools fear losing autonomy and the ability to operate independently. Furthermore, he pointed out that it's typically lower-quality private schools—those desperate for funding—that opt into these programs. In his own words, “voucher program regulations likely reduce the average quality of private schools that are available to students using vouchers.” This is a far cry from the rosy picture he paints today.

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3. Karlis, Michael. "School-voucher 'evangelist' with Texas ties on leave after gay porn videos resurface." *San Antonio Current*. 25 Sept 2024. <https://www.sacurrent.com/news/school-voucher-evangelist-with-texas-ties-on-leave-after-gay-porn-videos-resurface-35664019>

4. DeAngelis, Corey. "Regulations Are Keeping the Best Private Schools out of School Voucher Programs." *Cato Institute*. 22 Sept 2018. <https://www.cato.org/commentary/regulations-are-keeping-best-private-schools-out-school-voucher-programs>

"Lower-quality private schools are more likely to accept the voucher offer, regardless of the strings attached, because they are the most desperate for cash."

Corey DeAngelis

This scenario is not a fairy tale. There are plenty of examples nationally where already-failing schools are then publicly funded with voucher dollars leaving families with lackluster options for educational alternatives. Take, for example, Title of Liberty Academy in Mesa, AZ which had formerly been a charter school named ARCHES Academy. The charter was not only struggling financially, but had its charter revoked by the state due to dismal academic performance.<sup>5</sup> It simply rebranded itself and reopened as a private school now eligible to receive state funding through voucher dollars.

## The Religious Education Dilemma

The voucher program creates particular challenges for religious education. While Christian schools might initially welcome public funding, this creates two significant problems:

First, accepting government money opens religious schools to future regulatory control that could compromise their faith-based mission. We've already seen this in other states, where religious schools accepting vouchers face increasing pressure to modify their teachings on marriage, gender, and other matters of faith.

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5. Hager, Eli. "How a failed Arizona charter reopened as a private, taxpayer-funded religious school." *Arizona Daily Star*. 4 Jan 2025. [https://tucson.com/news/state-regional/education/how-a-failed-arizona-charter-reopened-as-a-private-taxpayer-funded-religious-school/article\\_a5669d0e-c92e-11ef-8cc7-479a9f8ea8c4.html](https://tucson.com/news/state-regional/education/how-a-failed-arizona-charter-reopened-as-a-private-taxpayer-funded-religious-school/article_a5669d0e-c92e-11ef-8cc7-479a9f8ea8c4.html)

Second, the program cannot legally discriminate between religions in distributing funds. Recent controversies in Florida highlight this reality. There, taxpayers discovered their money was funding Islamic schools that taught ideologies fundamentally opposed to American and Judeo-Christian values.<sup>6</sup> Tennessee taxpayers would face the same dilemma—unable to prevent their tax dollars from funding religious education that contradicts their deeply held beliefs.

## The Threat to Home Schools

While the current bill attempts to exclude homeschools from its scope,<sup>7</sup> the lines between homeschooling and private education often blur, particularly regarding umbrella schools and hybrid programs. As regulations expand, homeschool families could face increasing pressure to conform to state requirements or risk losing access to educational resources.

Once private schools become dependent on voucher funding, removing burdensome regulations becomes nearly impossible. Schools adapt their budgets and operations around government funding, making it extremely difficult to later reject new regulatory requirements without facing a financial crisis.

The promise of autonomy in today's bill offers no protection against tomorrow's regulations. As we've seen repeatedly, gov-

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6. Israel, David. "Florida to Revoke Miami Private Muslim School's Vouchers over Imam's Antisemitism." *JewishPress.com*. 19 May 2024. <https://www.jewishpress.com/news/on-campus/florida-to-revoke-miami-private-muslim-schools-vouchers-over-imams-antisemitism/2024/05/19/>

7. Senate Bill 1. *114th Tennessee General Assembly*. Section 2 § 49-6-3501(2), "Eligible student" means a resident of this state who is entitled to attend a public school, except for a student enrolled in a home school, as defined in § 49-6-3050, or in a church-related school, as defined in § 49-50-801, with which the student's parent is associated, registered, or is participating as a parent-teacher for purposes of § 49-6-3050(a)(2) or (a)(3);

ernment funding inevitably leads to government control. Tennessee's private schools, particularly its religious institutions, would be wise to reject this Trojan horse before it breaches their gates.



## THE MYTH OF INCREASED CHOICE

One of the most persuasive-sounding arguments for school vouchers is that they increase educational choice for families. Yet this fundamentally misrepresents both the current state of educational freedom in Tennessee and the true nature of the proposed program.

### **Freedom vs. Funding**

Tennessee's educational landscape already offers parents complete freedom to direct their children's education through multiple pathways. A parent in Memphis can choose to send their child to the local public school, while a family in Nashville might opt for one of the city's many private academies. Parents in rural communities can embrace homeschooling, tailoring education to their child's specific needs and learning style. Some families find the perfect balance through hybrid models, combining traditional schooling with home education. Faith-based education remains readily available through Tennessee's extensive network of religious schools, allowing parents to align their children's education with their religious values.

These choices exist today, enshrined in Tennessee law and practiced by families across our state. No government permis-

sion is required, and no bureaucrat stands between parents and their preferred educational path. These freedoms aren't theoretical—they're being exercised every day by Tennessee families from Mountain City to Memphis.

This reality exposes the fundamental flaw in the "school choice" argument. Proponents aren't actually fighting for *educational freedom*. Instead, they're advocating for government subsidies to fund these already-existing choices. This transforms the discussion from one about liberty to one about wealth redistribution - a very different conversation that deserves to be recognized for what it truly is.

Consider this analogy: All Americans have the freedom to choose where they live. Some might prefer a beachfront property in Florida or a mountain cabin in Colorado. The fact that not everyone can afford their dream home doesn't mean we lack housing freedom - and it certainly doesn't justify creating a government program to subsidize personal housing preferences. The same principle applies to education.

## The Welfare Question

When we strip away the "choice" rhetoric, what remains is a straightforward welfare program - taking tax dollars from all Tennesseans to subsidize the private educational preferences of some families. This raises a fundamental question conservatives have long grappled with: Should taxpayers be compelled to fund the personal choices of others? It is worth noting that the Governor's Education Freedom Act of 2025 is indeed legally defined as a state and local public benefit.<sup>1</sup> In other words, this program will be legally administrated as a new entitlement program in Tennessee. It is anything but a *tax refund*.

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1. Senate Bill 1. *114th Tennessee General Assembly*. Section 2. § 49-6-3510(2)

This isn't about denying help to truly needy families. Private charities, churches, and scholarship programs already exist to assist low-income students in accessing private education. These voluntary arrangements represent genuine community support without government compulsion or control. The voucher program would replace these organic, community-based solutions with a government bureaucracy.

### **The Revealing Path Not Taken**

Perhaps the most telling aspect of the current debate is what isn't being proposed. If the goal is truly to improve educational outcomes through competition, a much simpler solution is to reduce the regulatory burden on public schools.

The Tennessee legislature has complete authority to:

- Reduce testing requirements
- Eliminate burdensome paperwork
- Grant more autonomy to teachers
- Allow innovation in teaching methods
- Remove unnecessary administrative requirements
- Adopt the types of curricula that seem to be working in the private sector
- Rid public schools of DEI and other non-academic programs
- Pass measures that lessen the influence of liberal teachers' unions

- Give parents the ability to recall ineffective school board members
- Make local superintendents elected instead of appointed

These changes would cost taxpayers nothing. In fact, they would likely save money by reducing administrative overhead. Yet, instead of pursuing this straightforward path to educational improvement, proponents push for an expensive new entitlement program that would increase government involvement in private education.

This preference for vouchers over deregulation reveals the true agenda. **This isn't about improving education through market forces - it's about control.** By making private schools dependent on government funding, the program would ultimately bring all education under increased state oversight.

## **The Market Distortion**

Rather than fostering genuine market competition, voucher programs inevitably distort the natural dynamics that currently make private schools successful. Think about how markets typically work: Schools set their tuition based on their costs, quality, and what their community can support. Parents weigh these prices against the value offered. This organic interaction creates genuine competition and drives quality. But inject government funding into this equation, and everything changes.

Schools begin shaping their tuition around voucher amounts rather than actual costs and value. They become increasingly dependent on political decisions about funding levels instead of focusing solely on meeting parent and student needs. It's like watching a formerly independent business gradually transform into a government contractor.

This dependency breeds a more insidious problem. As schools adapt their budgets and operations around government funding, they become less able to resist new regulations and requirements. True competition diminishes as schools increasingly compete for government approval rather than parent satisfaction. We've seen this pattern play out in higher education, where government funding through student loans has led to skyrocketing costs and decreased educational quality.

Perhaps most concerning is what happens to schools that try to maintain their independence. When voucher-funded competitors can artificially lower their prices through government subsidies, truly independent schools often find themselves priced out of the market. We risk creating a system where genuine educational alternatives - those completely free from government influence - become increasingly rare.

This isn't theoretical. In states with extensive voucher programs, we've already witnessed this transformation. The vibrant marketplace of truly independent educational options gradually gives way to a system of government-dependent schools that look private on paper but increasingly operate at the whim of state bureaucrats.

Private schools currently work precisely because they remain independent of government control and responsive to parent demands. Injecting government funding into this working system risks destroying the very qualities that make these schools successful.

## **The Reality of Choice**

True educational choice means preserving genuine alternatives to government-controlled education. It means maintaining the independence of private schools and protecting the autonomy of homeschooling families. Most importantly, it means recog-

nizing that **government funding and genuine choice are mutually exclusive.**

The proposed voucher program would not expand educational freedom but compromise it by making private education increasingly dependent on and accountable to government bureaucrats. Conservatives should instead advocate for reducing regulations on all schools, allowing genuine market forces to improve education without expanding government control.

## THE FAILED PROMISE OF COMPETITION

Advocates of Tennessee's voucher program frequently cite a "99% parent satisfaction rate" from the pilot program. While this statistic is appealing, it masks a more troubling reality: the program is failing to deliver its promised academic improvements.

### The Reality Behind the Numbers

Recent TCAP results from the 2023-24 school year tell a sobering story. In Shelby County, where the program has been extensively promoted, ESA students are actually performing worse than their public school counterparts. Only 18.7% of ESA students are meeting or exceeding expectations in math proficiency - lagging behind even the struggling public school system they left behind.

This underperformance isn't limited to a single subject or district. Looking at the English Language Arts (ELA) results, we see a similar pattern. In Davidson County, for instance, ESA students achieved a proficiency rate of 28.8%, while the public school system - despite its challenges - maintained a 30.5% proficiency rate.

Some supporters of the program have attempted to dismiss these results by suggesting the comparison isn't fair - that we're comparing ESA students from disadvantaged backgrounds to the broader public school population. However, this defense falls apart when we examine county-by-county comparisons. In Memphis-Shelby County, for example, ESA students and public school students come from similar demographic backgrounds, yet the ESA students show no meaningful academic improvements. Both groups achieved identical math proficiency rates of 18.7%.

## **The Cost of Failure**

These disappointing results wouldn't be quite so concerning if the program were inexpensive. But Tennessee taxpayers are spending millions of dollars to achieve outcomes that are, at best, no better than the existing public school system. The pilot program has already cost tens of millions, yet has failed to demonstrate any convincing evidence of academic improvement.

Now, Governor Lee proposes to expand this failing model statewide at a cost exceeding \$400 million in the first year alone. This represents an enormous investment in a program that has shown no ability to deliver on its primary promise: improving educational outcomes through competition.

Tennessee isn't the first state to discover that voucher programs often fail to deliver their promised improvements. Studies from Indiana, Louisiana, and Ohio have shown similar patterns - high parent satisfaction rates coupled with stagnant or declining academic performance. This disconnect between parent satisfaction and actual academic outcomes suggests that while parents might appreciate having options, the programs aren't actually improving educational quality.

Breaking down the 2023-24 TCAP results further reveals:

- In Davidson County, 39.8% of ESA students scored "below expectations" in math, compared to 36.9% of public school students
- In English Language Arts, ESA students consistently showed lower percentages in the "exceeded expectations" category across all participating districts
- Hamilton County ESA students achieved an 18.1% proficiency rate in math, significantly below the public school rate of 36.6%

These numbers become even more concerning when we consider that private schools typically have smaller class sizes and more resources per student. If these advantages aren't translating into better academic outcomes in the pilot program, there's little reason to believe expanded vouchers would improve education statewide.

## **The Risk to Private Education**

Perhaps most alarming is how these results might impact Tennessee's currently successful private schools. By expanding a program that shows no evidence of academic improvement, we risk compromising the independence and effectiveness of private schools that are currently working well. The regulatory burdens and market distortions we discussed earlier would affect all private schools, not just those struggling to improve student outcomes.

Before expanding this program statewide, conservatives should demand evidence that it actually works. The current data shows:

- No meaningful academic improvements
- Significant costs to taxpayers
- Risks to existing successful private schools
- No clear path to better outcomes

The 99% parent satisfaction rate, while positive, cannot outweigh the program's failure to improve academic performance. Tennessee's children deserve better than an expensive program that fails to deliver real educational improvements. Rather than expanding a failing model statewide, we should focus on solutions that have demonstrated success in improving educational outcomes without compromising the independence of private education.

## CONSERVATIVE SOLUTIONS FOR EDUCATION

**W**hen we oppose school vouchers, we're often asked: "What's your alternative?" This question deserves a thoughtful response, as conservatives must do more than simply critique failed policies. We need to offer viable solutions that align with our principles of limited government, fiscal responsibility, and genuine free-market competition.

### **Empowering Public Schools Through Deregulation**

The most straightforward path to educational improvement requires no new spending or programs. The Tennessee legislature already has the authority to reduce burdensome regulations on public schools. This would allow them to operate more like their private counterparts, fostering genuine competition and innovation.

Consider how private schools succeed today: They can hire experienced professionals without requiring specific certifications, adapt their curriculum quickly to meet student needs, and are not bound by excessive testing requirements or bureaucratic red tape. These freedoms do not cost taxpayers a dime; they simply require government to step back.

The legislature has complete constitutional authority over the public school system in Tennessee and could make these changes applicable statewide. It is important to note that all powers and duties of a local education agency (LEA) are strictly defined and enacted by the General Assembly. The mantra by school choice advocates is that teachers' unions have all the power. That could not be further from the truth. Your state legislature has 100% control over all public schools within the state.

By reducing regulations on public schools rather than increasing them on private ones, we create genuine competition without compromising educational independence.

## **Tax Relief Instead of Wealth Redistribution**

Rather than creating new government spending programs, conservatives should support tax policies that help families keep more of their own money for education. Non-refundable tax credits, unlike vouchers, never become government funds subject to government control. They simply allow families to keep more of what they earn to spend on education.

Several states have implemented successful tax credit programs that:

- Reduce families' tax burden based on educational expenses
- Allow businesses to receive credits for funding student scholarships by nonprofits
- Encourage private charitable giving to education
- Avoid the regulatory threats that come with direct government funding

These approaches preserve the independence of private education while providing relief to families seeking educational alternatives.

## **Strengthening Community-Based Solutions**

History shows that communities have a remarkable capacity to support education without government intervention. Long before government-funded schools became the norm, local organizations and institutions found creative ways to ensure that children received quality education regardless of their families' financial circumstances.

Consider how this works in practice: A local church notices several families in its congregation struggling to afford private school tuition. Rather than looking to government solutions, it establishes a scholarship fund, allowing more fortunate members to help support the education of children in their community. This creates not just financial support but a genuine connection between givers and recipients—a true investment in the community's future.

Similarly, local businesses often recognize that supporting education serves both their community and their future workforce needs. When business leaders partner with schools to create internship programs, provide equipment, or fund scholarships, they forge meaningful connections that benefit everyone involved. These partnerships emerge organically based on local needs and opportunities rather than through government mandates.

Community foundations play a particularly powerful role in this ecosystem. When local leaders establish education foundations, they can respond quickly to specific community needs - whether that's providing scholarships, funding special programs, or supporting innovative teaching methods. Because

these foundations are rooted in the community, they understand local challenges and opportunities in ways that distant government bureaucracies never could.

We're also seeing exciting developments in voluntary cooperative learning arrangements, where families and educators collaborate to create innovative educational solutions. Whether forming study groups, sharing teaching resources, or creating hybrid learning environments, these grassroots efforts demonstrate how communities can expand educational opportunities without government intervention.

These local solutions work because they emerge from authentic community relationships and shared values. When a scholarship comes from your local church or business community rather than a government program, it strengthens social bonds while preserving educational independence. Communities have traditionally lifted each other up—not through government redistribution but through voluntary cooperation and genuine charity.

## **Protecting Educational Freedom**

At the heart of educational excellence lies a precious independence that we must vigilantly protect. Today's thriving private schools and homeschool communities succeed precisely because they operate free from the suffocating grip of government oversight. This independence allows them to innovate, adapt to student needs, and maintain strong values-based education in ways that heavily regulated public schools often cannot.

Every time a new education bill appears in the legislature, we must carefully examine how it might chip away at this independence. When federal programs dangle funding in exchange for adopting certain standards or practices, we must recognize these offers for what they are - attempts to centralize control over ed-

ucation. When testing mandates expand, we must understand how they subtly pressure schools to teach to standardized tests rather than pursue genuine education excellence.

The homeschool community offers a powerful example of what educational freedom can achieve. Free from excessive regulation, homeschool families have created diverse and effective learning environments tailored to their children's needs. They've developed innovative curricula, formed supportive communities, and consistently demonstrated strong academic outcomes. This success stems directly from their independence from government control and funding.

The history of education reform offers a sobering lesson: government involvement, no matter how well-intentioned, tends to stifle the innovation and flexibility that make schools successful. Government oversight typically expands until it chokes out the independence that allowed educational excellence to flourish.

As conservatives, we must recognize that defending educational independence isn't just about opposing bad policies. It requires a proactive effort to protect and expand the freedoms that make educational excellence possible. This means actively working to reduce existing mandates while steadfastly resisting new encroachments on educational liberty.

Conservative solutions for education should focus on:

- Reducing government barriers rather than increasing government funding
- Empowering families through tax relief rather than new spending
- Encouraging more local and community-centered solutions

- Protecting educational independence rather than compromising it
- Embracing innovation through market forces rather than bureaucratic oversight

These approaches align with conservative principles while offering genuine paths to educational improvement. They avoid the pitfalls of government dependency while preserving the autonomy that makes private education successful.

We can either follow the failed path of government expansion through vouchers, or we can embrace truly conservative solutions that reduce regulation, support families through tax relief, and protect educational independence. The choice before us isn't between vouchers and the status quo – it's between government control and genuine educational freedom.

By rejecting vouchers and embracing these market-based alternatives, we can improve education while preserving the principles that make Tennessee's educational diversity one of our greatest strengths.

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## CONCLUSION

Conservatives must see Governor Bill Lee's voucher proposal for what it truly is - not a path to educational freedom but a massive expansion of government influence that threatens the very independence that makes private education successful.

The evidence is clear. The pilot program's disappointing academic results show that ESA students perform no better, and sometimes worse, than their public school peers. Yet proponents push to expand this failing model statewide at a staggering cost, exceeding \$400 million in its first year alone. This represents not just a financial burden on Tennessee taxpayers but a fundamental threat to a parent's right to educate their child free from government constraints.

The program's structural flaws are impossible to ignore. More than half of Tennessee's counties have no qualifying private schools, meaning rural taxpayers would be forced to fund an educational program they cannot access. The "do no harm" funding provision creates confusion about duplicative payments, while the \$2,000 teacher bonuses appear designed to buy support rather than improve education. Most troublingly, the program opens the door to expanding government control over private education through administrative rulemaking that could occur largely outside public view.

We must remember that Tennessee parents already have complete educational freedom and choice. They can choose public schools, private schools, homeschooling, or hybrid models. What proponents actually seek isn't educational choice but government subsidy of private choices. This distinction matters deeply because government funding inevitably leads to government control.

History offers clear warnings. From Sweden to Australia to Florida, we've seen how government funding of private education gradually leads to government control of private education. The initial promises of autonomy give way to expanding regulation, testing mandates, and curriculum requirements. Once schools become dependent on government funding, they lose the very independence that made them successful.

Instead of creating an expensive new entitlement program, conservatives should advocate for solutions that align with our principles: reducing regulations on all schools, providing tax relief to families, strengthening community-based scholarship programs, and most importantly, protecting the independence of private education. These approaches can expand educational opportunities without compromising liberty.

Tennessee's educational future depends on preserving genuine educational freedom—not replacing it with government-funded and government-controlled alternatives. The path to better education lies not in expanded government involvement but in protecting and strengthening the independence that allows genuine educational excellence to flourish.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gary Humble serves as the founder and executive director of Tennessee Stands, a constitutional advocacy organization dedicated to defending individual liberty and promoting limited government through active citizen engagement in the legislative process. Under his leadership, Tennessee Stands has become a significant voice for conservative principles in the state, equipping citizens to effectively engage with their government and hold elected officials accountable.

Gary's approach to political advocacy is deeply rooted in his biblical worldview, shaped by his education in Bible college and years of ministry experience. As a student of theology and practicing a Christian faith, he understands that proper governance must align with the fundamental truth of scripture rather than shifting cultural winds.

In 2021, amid growing concerns about government overreach during the COVID-19 pandemic, Gary drafted crucial legislation that successfully passed into law, protecting Ten-

nesseans from state-mandated COVID-19 shots. This achievement demonstrated the power of informed, principled citizen advocacy in shaping state policy.

Gary took his commitment to conservative governance to the next level in 2022 as a candidate for the Tennessee State Senate, bringing his message of constitutional fidelity and limited government directly to voters. He continues to reach audiences across Tennessee and beyond as co-host of *The Freedom Matters Podcast*, where he provides insight into state politics and equips citizens for effective advocacy.

Gary lives in Franklin, Tennessee with his family. Married to his high school sweetheart for over 26 years, he and his wife are raising three sons, instilling in them the same passion for liberty and principled citizenship that drives his work at Tennessee Stands. His unique combination of ministry background, political advocacy, and family values informs his drive to protect liberty for future generations through moral conviction and obedience to Almighty God.

## ABOUT TENNESSEE STANDS



In an era of expanding government power and declining constitutional fidelity, Tennessee Stands emerged as a voice for liberty and limited government. Founded on the principle that engaged citizens represent the best defense against government overreach, our organization works to protect individual rights through informed, strategic engagement in the legislative process.

We believe that government exists to secure our God-given rights, not to determine them. This foundational principle shapes everything we do. When government oversteps its constitutional boundaries—whether through executive orders, legislative overreach, or bureaucratic expansion—we stand ready to defend liberty through principled, effective action.

Tennessee Stands operates at the intersection of principle and practice. We don't just advocate for constitutional governance; we equip citizens with the knowledge and tools needed to engage effectively in the legislative process. Through detailed bill analysis, strategic advocacy training, and direct engagement with legislators, we help Tennesseans protect their fundamental rights.

Our work focuses on several crucial areas. We defend religious liberty against government interference, protect parental rights in education, oppose unconstitutional mandates, and advocate for fiscal responsibility. But perhaps our most important work involves teaching citizens how to engage effectively with their government. We believe that informed, active citizens represent the best safeguard of liberty.

What sets Tennessee Stands apart is our commitment to both principle and process. We understand that defending liberty requires more than just good intentions—it demands knowledge of legislative procedures, strategic thinking, and coordinated action. Through our educational programs, legislative updates, and advocacy initiatives, we help citizens transform their passion for liberty into effective action.

We operate independently of any political party or special interest group. Our allegiance is to constitutional principles and the citizens of Tennessee. This independence allows us to evaluate legislation and government actions based solely on their alignment with constitutional principles and their impact on individual liberty.

As threats to liberty continue evolving, so does our approach to defending it. We constantly refine our strategies, expand our educational offerings, and strengthen our advocacy networks. But our fundamental mission remains unchanged: empowering citizens to protect their God-given rights through informed, principled engagement with their government.

Join us in this crucial work. Whether you're new to civic engagement or a seasoned advocate, Tennessee Stands provides the resources, training, and support you need to defend liberty effectively. Together, we can ensure that Tennessee remains a stronghold of constitutional governance and individual freedom.



[www.tennesseestands.org](http://www.tennesseestands.org)

**LEARN MORE ABOUT TENNESSEE STANDS  
AND SUBSCRIBE TO OUR NEWSLETTER**



Governor Bill Lee's universal school voucher program promises educational freedom through "choice," but beneath this appealing message lies a \$400+ million expansion of government power that threatens the very independence of private education in Tennessee. This analysis reveals:

- How the program redistributes wealth from rural to urban areas, with rural counties having no private school options while being forced to fund the program
- Why disappointing results from the pilot program prove this expensive initiative fails to deliver its promised improvements in student achievement
- How government funding inevitably leads to government control, threatening the autonomy that makes private schools successful today

Written for Tennessee conservatives who value educational freedom and fiscal responsibility, this brief but powerful examination exposes the true nature of school vouchers and offers real solutions for improving education without expanding government control.