

# News From The States

# EVENING WRAP

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By [Kate Queram](#)

Once upon a time, vouchers were just stand-ins for gift certificates or coupons, like the ones they give you at the grocery store when the Diet Coke is on sale but out of stock. Today, “voucher” is just another code word, co-opted to advance a right-wing plan to funnel public education money to private and religious schools. At some point, we will be using entirely separate dictionaries.



## The Big Takeaway

“Vouchers” is a blanket term for a handful of state-level programs that allow parents to divert public education funding — ostensibly, the share they pay through property taxes — to offset the cost of their children’s private school tuition. Nothing about this really makes sense. Public money exists to fund public institutions, even if you, personally, would prefer to spend your tax dollars elsewhere. (This is America. No one gets to decide where their money goes.) It usually also comes with accountability measures that do not apply to private schools, which can limit enrollment and teach whatever they want with little oversight, even if they accept taxpayer-funded vouchers. The entire system is, to put it mildly, a bit wonky.



*“And the blue person goes to private school, and we don’t know what they teach there, even though it’s now a publicly funded institution.”*

*(Photo by Getty Images)*

**It also doesn’t work**, though I suppose that depends on your definition of success. Vouchers don’t improve [academic performance](#), but they *do* reduce expenses for [a lot of wealthy parents](#) whose children already attend private school. This has long been the goal of the so-called “school choice” movement, which began in the 1950s as a [“free market” proposal](#) that gathered support among parents hoping to send their children to religious schools and those opposed to desegregation. Still, it spread slowly. For decades, vouchers were predominantly a Southern concept. By 2023, [16 states](#) had launched — and in some cases, expanded — voucher programs. [As of February](#), dozens of related proposals were under consideration in at least 24 states.

**Among those was Alabama**, where Gov. Kay Ivey [on Thursday](#) signed into law a [voucher program](#) that will provide up to \$7,000 per year for non-public education expenses beginning in the fall of 2025. For the first two years, the program will be limited to families making less than 300% of the [federal poverty level](#), or \$77,460 for a family of three. But by 2027, it will be open to everyone, [the Alabama Reflector reported](#).

**The bill had been fast-tracked in the Senate** following a [surprise committee hearing](#) on Tuesday that critics said left little time for debate or consideration. Democrats panned the proposal as a drain on state education funding before

offering a flurry of amendments during floor debate Wednesday, including provisions that would have limited vouchers to accredited private schools with certified teachers. None made it into the bill. Eventually, the frustration bubbled over.

“There’s not really a choice here for rural school children, which makes up 40% of this public school system in the state of Alabama,” said state Sen. Bobby Singleton, the chamber’s top Democrat. “Some 300,000 kids can be left out of this choice. It’s really no choice to those kids who are receiving free and reduced lunches. Whose parents have to go to work early in the morning and cannot travel to the next county to go to school. It’s not a choice, people. It’s not a choice to them. They got to, they got to, they got to, they got to hammer it out.”



*Alabama state Sen. Arthur Orr wants to keep it on the sunny side, please.  
(Photo by Stew Milne for the Alabama Reflector)*

Tsk tsk, replied Republican Sen. Arthur Orr.

“You’re being negative,” he said.

“I’m just being truthful,” Singleton responded.

**The fate of South Carolina’s voucher program** lies with the state Supreme Court, which must decide whether funding private school scholarships with taxpayer money violates a constitutional ban on private schools directly benefiting

from public money, [per the South Carolina Daily Gazette](#). You may find yourself wondering, *is this ... really a question?* And the answer is no, but yes, because this is the American judicial system, where everything is up for interpretation.

**In this case, the key word is “directly.”** Attorneys for the South Carolina Education Association and the NAACP claim the law, which funds \$6,000 scholarships for non-public education expenses, *directly* benefits private schools, in *direct* violation of the state constitution. Lawyers for the state say the law explicitly skirts the ban by placing the scholarship money in a “trust fund,” which parents can use for any number of things, from tuition to transportation.



*That there's a loophole!*  
(Photo by klikk/Adobe Stock)

Even if a family spent their entire allotment on tuition, it wouldn't pay the entire bill, Miles Coleman, an attorney for the state Department of Education, said during oral arguments Wednesday.

“This money isn't even enough to cover what we think is the cost as a state to educate children,” he said. It's not some sort of a largesse boon to recipients.”

**Justice seemed largely skeptical.** For now, the program is limited to 5,000 Medicaid-eligible students, but eligibility will triple in two years, expanding to include children in higher-income homes at an expected annual cost of \$90 million. [A GOP-backed proposal](#) would drive that price even higher by opening the

program to all students, regardless of income level. Altogether, the piles of cash were a little much for Chief Justice Don Beatty to deal with.

“Ninety million dollars will fund more than 2,200 school teachers in this state, and there’s a shortage of school teachers — 2,200 based on their paltry pay,” he said. “That’s what \$90 million would do. This \$90 million could be used to raise some of those teachers’ pay to get quality teachers in our schools, yet we want to shift all this money to private schools to keep them afloat.”



*The table is tilting.*

*(Photo by Nuria Martinez-Keel/Oklahoma Voice)*

**Religious charter schools are more top of mind in Oklahoma**, thanks in part to the new state education secretary, who cast one of three majority votes [to establish](#) the nation’s first nonsecular academy. Beyond that, Nellie Tayloe Sanders has no classroom experience. But she’s confident her unique perspective is a “voice that is really needed at the table,” [the Oklahoma Voice reported](#).

Mostly, that perspective is corporate. Sanders, a native of D.C., is the vice president of philanthropy for a hospice care center; before that, she worked in advertising. Her husband, Mike Sanders, is the executive director of the Oklahoma Broadband Office and former state lawmaker. Sanders, who has

dyslexia and thinks in images, said she views the public school system as a wooden table with cracks on each of its four legs (one for reading proficiency, one for math, one for teacher workforce, and one for classroom “soft skills”). Without the right support, the whole thing could buckle.

“I want to hear and understand why that’s happening,” Sanders said. “Where’s the crack? Where’s that leg eroding?”

“I don’t know that there’s one answer here,” she continued. “I think it’s an opportunity. That’s one of the things that Gov. [Kevin] Stitt has really tasked me with, is trying to understand, how do we provide individualized support to every single child in the state? And so, it’s going to take a lot of people coming together.”

### **Individualized support**

- [Alaska Senate OKs mental health education in schools bill](#)
- [Indiana lawmakers still undecided on plan to address chronic student absenteeism](#)
- [School board transparency on the docket before Maryland Senate panel](#)
- [West Virginia elementary school discipline bill, aimed at helping teachers remove violent students, moves forward](#)



### **State of Our Democracy**

President Joe Biden will kick off an almost certainly bruising reelection campaign Thursday by delivering the State of the Union address to a chamber packed with Republicans, some of whom [openly heckled him](#) when he tried this in 2022. (And this is why no one runs for president.) Senior administration officials said Wednesday the speech would include a series of policy proposals related to housing, along with larger themes of protecting abortion access and our “democratic institutions,” [our D.C. bureau reported](#).



*I would rather cheer for Ohio State. (OK, no I wouldn't, but I almost would.)  
(Photo by Brendan Hoffman/Getty Images)*

Biden is also expected to tout his accomplishments, including the Inflation Reduction Act and student loan debt forgiveness, and to call out Republicans for endlessly droning on about the border crisis while also refusing to enact legislation to address the problem.

**Congressional lawmakers can't (or aren't supposed to) respond verbally during the speech**, but they can convey their feelings through their guest lists. Prominent Democrats have extended invites to people whose lives have been affected by reproductive health care, including Elizabeth Carr, the first person born in the United States through in vitro fertilization, who will attend as a guest of Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.).

“In the wake of [the Alabama Supreme Court's ruling](#), it's more important than ever that we commit to protecting access to IVF services nationwide,” Kaine said in a statement. “We must work to safeguard IVF so the Elizabeth Carrs of the world can continue to be born.”

Meanwhile, House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.) is bringing more than 20 guests, including his pastor, a hostage taken by Hamas during its Oct. 7 attack on Israel, the parents of a Wall Street Journal reporter detained in Russia, a mother whose son died of fentanyl poisoning, and several parents whose children died during the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Collectively, the roster exemplifies what Johnson described as Biden’s “failed policies,” which have “opened our borders, jeopardized our safety, reduced our standard of living, and weakened our standing on the world stage.”

“While America’s state of the union is sadly in decline,” Johnson said in a statement, “these individuals remind us of America’s greatness, even in the face of such challenging circumstances.”

### **Even in the face**

- [Biden to announce U.S. will construct a port on Gaza coast to deliver humanitarian aid](#)
- [Ranked choice supporters ask judge for pre-election ruling on Alaska repeal group’s misdeeds](#)
- [Report classifies one-fifth of Michigan Legislature as ‘election deniers’](#)
- [Early vote looks sluggish two weeks from Ohio’s primary election](#)



### **From The Newsrooms**

#### **Economy**

- [Know what an APR margin is? If you have credit card, it’s likely driving up your interest rate](#)
- [Kansas sues TikTok for allegedly hooking minors on dopamine-spiking ‘filth, profanity’](#)
- [Minneapolis passes Uber and Lyft minimum pay ordinance with veto-proof majority](#)
- [Prisons, education and the end of federal pandemic aid: South Dakota Legislature passes \\$7.3 billion budget](#)

#### **Environment**

- [Clinging to coal: Kentucky utilities could have more hurdles to clear before retiring power plants](#)
- [Oregon’s legislative session ending without much-needed solutions to wildfire funding issues](#)
- [Developer-backed bill to end wetlands protections shelved by Tennessee Senate](#)
- [Anti-conservation group works to influence land use policy in three northern Wisconsin counties](#)



## Health Care

- [Fluoride in public water has slashed tooth decay, but some states may end mandates](#)
- [Biden backs radiation exposure compensation bill ahead of vote](#)
- [Is in vitro fertilization under threat in Kentucky too? Law matching Alabama's deepens concerns](#)
- [Louisiana seeks to overturn court ruling of 'abhorrent' prison health care](#)



## One Last Thing

This year's [Oscar-nominee gift bag](#) is worth an eye-popping \$178,000, with goodies ranging from an assortment of “raw, dehydrated, organic and non-GMO” pet food to a three-night stay at a private Swiss ski chalet valued at \$50,000. And nothing for the rest of us, goodbye.

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