

Indiana's [school voucher program](#) started in 2011. In the years since, lawmakers have expanded its reach and capacity to serve more than 34,000 students. It's been both a popular and a controversial education reform. Here's what you need to know.

What's a school voucher?

A school voucher is public money that Hoosier students can use toward private school tuition. It is also referred to as a School Choice Scholarship.

Can anybody get a voucher?

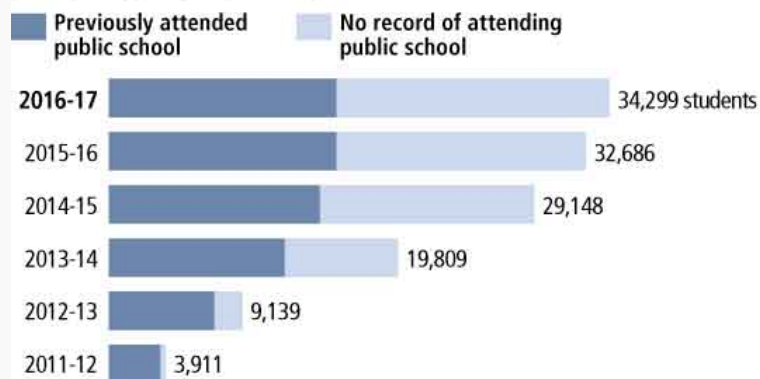
No. Students' families must fall under [certain income limits](#): A family of four, for example, must make less than \$68,265 a year to qualify. Students who receive a voucher can remain eligible for the assistance in subsequent school years if their family income modestly improves. The income limit is higher, too, for families of students with special education needs.

Originally, students needed to attend public school for the two semesters prior to receiving a voucher, or they needed to already be attending a private school with a tax-credit scholarship.

Now students can also qualify for vouchers if they have special needs, if they are assigned to an F-rated public school or if they have a sibling in the voucher program. And there's no limit to the number of students who can take vouchers.

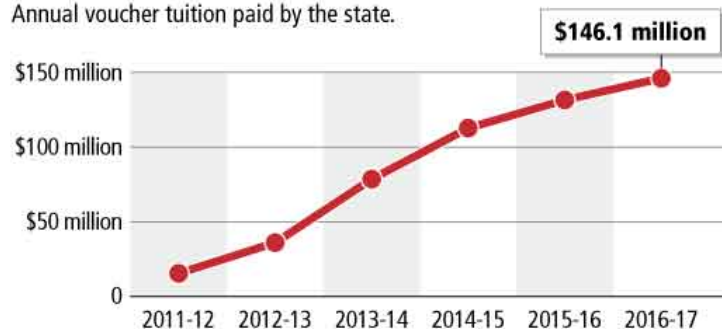
VOUCHERS IN INDIANA

Since the School Choice program began in 2011, the number of students participating has jumped every year.



VOUCHER COST

Annual voucher tuition paid by the state.



SOURCE: Indiana Department of Education

STEPHEN J. BEARD / INDYSTAR

Why does Indiana offer vouchers?

Voucher supporters say the program helps low-income families have a choice of where to send their students.

Wealthier families can afford to pay for private schools — allowing their children to escape from low-performing public schools. Vouchers are designed to make that option available to more people. With a voucher, low- and middle-income Hoosiers can more easily afford tuition at a private school.

Is a voucher school the same as a charter school?

No. A voucher school, also called a choice school, is a private school that accepts vouchers for tuition payments. A charter school is a public, tuition-free school run by a nonprofit. Both are considered "school choice" or referred to as education reforms, because they offer alternatives to traditional public schools.

Do vouchers fully cover tuition?

Sometimes, but not always. A voucher is **a set amount**, based on a portion of state per-pupil funding in a student's public school district.

For example, next year a voucher will be worth \$6,280.81 for a Indianapolis Public Schools student from a family of four making \$45,510 a year. It's worth \$3,489.34 for an IPS student from a family of four that makes up to \$68,265 a year.

For just under half of students who receive vouchers, that's enough to cover the full cost of tuition, especially when paired with other discounts the school may offer. But other families may have to seek other scholarships or foot part of the bill themselves.

For example, Seccina Memorial High School is one of the most popular choice options in Indianapolis. Its tuition for a new non-Catholic student is listed at \$11,835 before financial aid, plus \$125 to \$250 for a registration fee.

More: [A new look at school vouchers' costs](#)

Do all private schools take vouchers?

No. A school chooses whether to participate. The voucher program requires the private school to administer standardized tests, ISTEP and End-of-Course Assessments, so some private schools may not want to do that or follow other requirements. Others don't take vouchers because they want to restrict admission to parishioners, for example.

Do voucher schools have to admit all students who apply?

No. A voucher school is allowed to follow its own admissions policy. Schools may require, for example, students to provide ISTEP scores or take an entrance exam. They could also require weekly attendance at an associated church. But they have to apply these same standards to students regardless of whether they intend to seek voucher support, and schools may not discriminate against potential students based on race, color, national origin or disability.

Are all voucher schools religious?

Nearly all of Indiana's **300-plus voucher schools** are religious. Most of them are Christian, but there are also some Jewish and Muslim options, in addition to some secular schools.

Wait, so it's OK for public money to go to religious schools?

Yes. The Indiana State Teachers Association challenged the voucher program when it first started, arguing it crosses the line between church and state, and the state government shouldn't be funding religious education.

But in 2013, the Indiana Supreme Court **ruled that the voucher program was constitutional**, because it's the families, not the schools, who mainly benefit from the public funding of vouchers.

That had followed a U.S. Supreme Court decision in 2002. In *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, the justices ruled 5-4 that Ohio's voucher program was neutral on religion, since families choose where to use them.

How much public funding goes toward Indiana's voucher program?

This year, Indiana spent an estimated \$146 million on school vouchers, according to **a state report**. Over six years, the state has spent \$520 million in total on vouchers.

How does funding for vouchers compare to funding for public schools?

Traditional public schools receive the most local funding. They can tap into local property tax revenues and receive state per-pupil funding.

Charter schools receive state per-pupil funding and can apply for grant funding through the state, but they can't access local property tax dollars.

Vouchers receive the smallest proportion of state funding. They're worth a portion of the state per-pupil funding for the public school district in which the student lives. For middle income students, it's 50 percent of the funding; for low-income students, 90 percent of the funding. Private schools do not access local property tax dollars.

What standards are voucher schools held to?

Under state law, voucher schools receiving either a "D" or "F" for two consecutive years can't receive new voucher students for a year but current students can still receive the aid. If the school continues to receive a low rating for a third year, then it has to improve its scores for two years to accept new voucher students.

Lawmakers are debating whether to give low-performing voucher schools the ability to request a waiver or delay from the consequences for a year.

Advocates of the program argue voucher schools are held to a higher standard than traditional public schools because consequences automatically kick in if they fail for a shorter length of time. But opponents say traditional public schools that are consistently failing can face harsher penalties than voucher schools, such as closure or takeover by an outside operator.

At traditional public schools, the state can intervene earlier as a way to boost performance. But the Department of Education doesn't have the same oversight of private schools. State law requires state education officials to make random visits to just 5 percent, or about 16, of the voucher-participating schools each year.

More: [Will state ease up on voucher accountability?](#)

Do we know if students do better using vouchers for private schools than they do in public schools?

There's not a lot of research that specifically evaluates Indiana's voucher program.

The University of Notre Dame is expected to release a study soon, with preliminary data showing voucher students who transferred to private schools performed worse in math.

The bipartisan Center for Tax and Budget Accountability concluded, "Indiana's voucher program may actually diminish student achievement in the state over time because it diverts public taxpayer dollars away from the state's public education systems."

Studies in other states have shown mixed results. In a review of the Washington, D.C., program, researchers found a link between vouchers and higher graduation rates. Yet, newly-released reports on the Louisiana and Ohio voucher programs found students who use vouchers performed worse on standardized tests than their public school counterparts.

How does Indiana's voucher program compare to others across the country?

Indiana's voucher program is one of the largest in the country, but it's also considered one of the broadest because of how many different ways there are for students to qualify for vouchers. Many states limit their vouchers to serve only special education students, or students in failing schools.

More: [New report shows Indiana remains national leader on school vouchers](#)

Are vouchers bad for public schools?

Some people criticize the voucher program because it taps into state funds that would have otherwise gone to public schools. Voucher supporters, however, rebut this criticism by arguing that vouchers save the state money, because they use proportionately less funding than if students chose to attend public schools.

Some voucher proponents also argue that the competition from vouchers has forced public schools to improve, in order to compete to keep students from seeking other choices.

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