

Texas House committee hears marathon ESA testimony

March 12, 2025

Hundreds of parents, teachers and other citizens gathered at the Texas Capitol to make their voices heard regarding a bill that would send public funds to private schools.

The House Committee on Public Education held a marathon public hearing on [HB 3](#), a bill that would establish an education savings account program in Texas.

Citizens filled the hearing room and three overflow rooms for a hearing that began at 8 a.m. on March 11 and continued throughout the night and into the next morning. At the end of the hearing that lasted nearly 24 hours, the bill was left pending.

‘Parent-directed’ program

Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, chair of the committee and author of the bill, asserted the program would empower “parents to find the best educational pathway for their kids.” The [Texas Senate already passed a similar bill](#) early in the legislative session.



Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, chair

of the House Committee on Public Education, said education savings accounts would empower parents “to find the best educational pathway for their kids.” (Screen Capture Image)

Buckley said the education savings account program “flips the script,” offering a “parent-directed” as opposed to “school-directed” approach to educating students.

“I trust parents to make the best decision for their kids,” Buckley said. “I want every parent to have access to every tool in the toolbox.”

Buckley’s proposal would allocate \$1 billion toward education savings accounts families could direct to private schools for tuition and other expenses such as books and transportation costs.

The House plan would devote to an approved student an amount equal to 85 percent of what public schools receive per student—about \$10,900. While payments are directed by parents, they are sent directly to private schools.

Supporters framed the proposal as offering choice to low-income families seeking alternatives to low-performing neighborhood public schools.

Who will benefit?

However, the parents of any child could apply, including students already enrolled in private schools—a point of contention during the lengthy hearing.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, critiqued the voucher-style program as

potentially benefitting “millionaires and billionaires” at the expense of the common good.

“Instead of putting this toward public schools, roads, health care and water, we are sending it to parents who are already sending their kids to private school,” he said.

Buckley asserted his plan “provides choice while prioritizing Texas’ most high-needs and vulnerable students.”

If more students apply for the education savings account program than funding allows, HB 3 seeks to establish a framework to give priority in this order:

- First, prioritize students with special needs from families with an annual income at or below 500 percent of the federal poverty level. That would include a family of four making up to \$156,000.
- Next, give preference to families at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level—including a family of four making less than \$62,400.
- Next, families between 200 percent and 500 percent of the poverty level.
- Finally, families at or above 500 percent of the poverty level.

Rep. Gina Hinojosa, D-Austin, voiced serious concern about provisions in HB 3 that allow for-profit vendors—such as educational assessment organizations that will determine who receives a voucher—to solicit and accept anonymous gifts.

That provision “sets us up for bribes and graft,” Hinojosa asserted.

Rep. Jeff Leach, R-Plano, asserted “public schools have choices that parents don’t have,” insisting local school districts make decisions about curriculum, schedules and other matters about which many parents do not

agree.

“Why is true freedom, choice and competition something we are afraid of?” he asked.

‘Bullying,’ ‘bribing’ and ‘billionaire backing’

Talarico, a former middle school teacher currently pursuing a Master of Divinity degree from Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, framed the issue of public funds going to private schools in moral terms.



Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, said in regard to education savings accounts: “There are very powerful forces pushing this issue on us. This isn’t about education. It’s about politics.” (Screen Grab Image)

“This is our sixth hearing on vouchers in two years,” Talarico said. “We have not had six hearings on teacher pay. We have not had six hearings on student discipline. We have not had six hearings on student mental health. We have not had six hearings on arts education ...

“There are very powerful forces pushing this issue on us. This isn’t about education. It’s about politics. ... No other issue comes with this level of

bullying, this level of bribing, this level of billionaire backing.”

Talarico pointed out six of his House colleagues “sacrificed their seats” in order to resist vouchers two years ago. Those principled lawmakers were “buried under a mountain of big lies and big money,” he said.

Gov. Greg Abbott has made “school choice” in the form of education savings accounts his top legislative priority. Abbott supported the primary opponents of rural Republicans who defeated a voucher-style proposal in the 2023 legislative session, changing the composition of the Texas House of Representatives.

Talarico also provided historical perspective, noting the first voucher bill was introduced in Texas in 1957, three years after the U.S. Supreme Court issued its landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that declared as unconstitutional state laws mandating racial segregation in public schools.

“That first voucher bill was a deliberate attempt to resegregate public schools—to allow white parents to take their students out of newly integrated public schools and send them to white-only private schools,” Talarico said.

“Thankfully, Texas defeated that first voucher scheme in ’57, and we’ve defeated them in every decade since, including two years ago. I hope the same remains true this year.”

Hundreds signed up to testify, some noticeably absent

Along with hundreds of private citizens who registered to testify, the public hearing included invited testimony from supporters of voucher-style programs.

The first group of invited guests speaking in favor of the bill were Laura Colangelo, executive director of the Texas Private School Association; Jennifer Carr Allmon, executive director of the Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops; and Robert Enlow, president and CEO of EdChoice, a nonprofit advocacy group.

One invited witness absent from the committee hearing was Jeff Yass, cofounder and managing editor of Philadelphia-based Susquehanna International Group, whose contribution to Gov. Greg Abbott was the [largest single campaign donation](#) in Texas history.

In a [March 10 post on X](#)—formerly Twitter—Talarico wrote: “An out-of-state billionaire gave Greg Abbott \$12 million to pass a private school voucher scam. I’m joining my colleagues in requesting Mr. Jeff Yass testify before the Public Education Committee. Texans deserve to know who’s behind this scam.”

Talarico and Hinojosa—along with fellow committee members Rep. Alma Allen, D-Houston, and Rep. John Bryant, D-Dallas—sent a letter to Yass asking him to testify at the hearing.

“Given your significant role in funding efforts to reshape Texas’ public education system, we believe it only appropriate that you explain your position directly to the people whose schools and communities your money seeks to impact with school closures, program cuts, and teacher layoffs,” the letter states.