



Opportunity Scholarship Program Issue Brief

NCSBA Position

NCSBA believes the existing reporting requirements for the Opportunity Scholarship Program make a meaningful evaluation of student performance nearly impossible. Current regulations require participating private schools to administer and submit student scores from a standardized test of their choice – of which a wide variety exist. As a result, students in the voucher program do not have scores on a common metric that can be compared to other voucher students (let alone to public school students).

As the Program continues to grow – in both participation and funding – parents, educators, and policy makers should know whether a voucher program, funded by taxpayer dollars, is working. NCSBA, therefore, believes the General Assembly should limit participating private schools to administering the most commonly used norm-referenced tests, for voucher students, to adequately evaluate student performance and the overall impact of the Program. These commonly used norm-referenced tests include the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the Terra Nova, the Stanford Achievement Test, the Woodcock Johnson, or the Northwest Evaluation Association’s Measures of Academic Progress.

Background

In 2013, the North Carolina General Assembly enacted legislation establishing the Opportunity Scholarship Program.¹ The Program provided state-funded vouchers worth up to \$4,200 per year for eligible, low-income students in kindergarten through 12th grade to attend participating private schools. The State has made substantial investments in the Program over the past ten years. The publicly funded vouchers, for example, have increased from \$4,200/year to more than \$9,000/year.

Furthermore, in 2017, the General Assembly increased the Program’s budget every year until it reaches an annual allotment of \$144.8 million in 2027-28. However, the 2022 State budget increased the Program’s annual allotment even more to \$311.5 million by 2032-33.

Lawmakers also raised the household income eligibility from approximately \$60,000/year (133% of the free and reduced price lunch level) for a family of four in 2015-16 to roughly \$103,000/year (200% of the free and reduced price lunch level) for a family of four in 2023-24. As a result, the Program has seen significant growth since 2014-15 when eligible students began receiving publicly-funded private school vouchers. For example, 3,460 students received scholarships and 349 private schools participated in 2015-16. By 2022-23, approximately 24,000 students enrolled in one of 539 participating private schools across North Carolina. The total amount of scholarship funding awarded for the 2022-23 school year was over \$66 million.²

¹ G.S. 115C-562

² NCSEEA, Opportunity Scholarship Summary of Data, <https://www.ncseea.edu/opportunity-scholarship-summary-of-data/> (accessed January 20, 2023).

Despite continued growth, much remains unknown about the impact of vouchers on student performance. The first study on voucher-student performance surfaced in 2017, but the data contained many shortcomings.³ A second study, conducted in 2020, addressed those shortcomings, using a different methodology, yet indicated that two primary challenges inhibited an analysis of the Program's effects.⁴

First, the accountability requirements associated with the Program require participating private schools to administer and submit scores from any nationally normed standardized test of their choosing, whereas comparable public-school students take the criterion-referenced state test, the North Carolina End-of-Grade (EOG) exam. Thus, voucher students do not have scores on a common metric that could be pooled for comparison to other voucher students or students in the public-school sector. Second, although the establishing legislation calls for an evaluation of the Program, it does not incentivize applicants to participate in one, which introduces recruitment challenges with regard to the collection of original test score data. Limiting the number and type of tests private schools can administer to voucher students will alleviate these issues and provide a way to adequately evaluate student performance and the overall impact of the Program.

³ Children's Law Clinic, Duke Law School (Wettach, 2017)

⁴ Anna Egalite, D.T. Stallings, & Stephen Porter, "An Analysis of the Effects of North Carolina's Opportunity Scholarship Program on Student Achievement", *Sage Journals*, 2020.