

**Testimony of Marisol Garcia  
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**Before the  
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions  
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Chairman Cassidy, Ranking Member Sanders, and distinguished members of the Committee — thank you for the opportunity to testify about Arizona’s landscape for school choice.

My name is Marisol Garcia. I am an 8th grade social studies teacher in Phoenix, Arizona, where I have taught for more than 20 years. I am also the president of the Arizona Education Association, which represents more than 22,000 educators in our state.

In 2022, Arizona lawmakers overrode the will of state voters to enact a first-in-the-nation universal voucher program that Trump administration officials have cited as a national model for school choice. In my testimony today, I will outline the issues that resulted from Arizona’s adoption of universal vouchers and offer our state’s experience as a cautionary tale against further expansion.

**History of school choice in Arizona**

For more than three decades, Arizona has stood at the center of a national movement to undermine public education by severing the ties between families and neighborhood schools.

In 1994, our legislature took the first step toward this goal by establishing an open enrollment policy that allowed students to attend public schools outside of district boundaries. That move, combined with the authorization of charter schools the same year, fostered a complex landscape of school choice that has scattered children far beyond neighborhood schools without meaningfully improving student outcomes.

Today, there are hundreds of public, private, and charter schools — but fewer are waiting for the same bus, playing on the same sports teams, or graduating from the same high schools as their neighbors.

Many of the members of this committee have spoken at length about the close-knit small towns that you call home. I hope you will think for a moment about the role of neighborhood schools in building community bonds — and what is lost when those bonds fray.

In 2011, despite nearly two decades of disappointing results from Arizona’s early experiment with school choice, lawmakers doubled down by launching an early iteration of what would become our state’s voucher program. In the early days of the program, students receiving a voucher needed to have been previously enrolled in a public school — a policy designed to prevent taxpayer dollars from subsidizing tuition for wealthy students. Within a few years, however, those guardrails began to slip.

I want to note here that voucher programs have never been popular in Arizona. Today, between 85 and 95 percent of Arizona children attend public schools. Education is consistently a top issue for Arizona voters, and public polling indicates strong and unwavering support for public schools.

School privatization is a policy pushed by lawmakers and special interests — not by Arizona families. In 2017, the Arizona legislature passed legislation to expand vouchers to 70 percent of Arizonans. Four months after the bill crossed then-Governor Ducey’s desk, a grassroots, bipartisan group of parents delivered more than 100,000 dissenting signatures to the Secretary of State’s office — kicking off a people-powered initiative to repeal the law and prevent the diversion of taxpayer money to private hands.

In 2018, the voucher expansion was placed on the ballot as Prop 305 (Expansion of Empowerment Scholarship Accounts Referendum). Arizona voters resoundingly rejected the proposed expansion — 65 percent voted “no” on the referendum, a margin of 2-1.

In 2022, the Arizona legislature disregarded the will of the voters and made the voucher program universal — 100 percent of Arizona students are eligible for vouchers, regardless of income or prior public school attendance.

Today, Arizona’s universal voucher program is a bloated, bureaucratic boondoggle that costs three times more than initial estimates. I will focus on three areas:

- The students vouchers leave behind
- Waste, fraud, and abuse in Arizona’s voucher program
- Safety lapses in Arizona’s voucher system

### **Broken promises: the students vouchers leave behind**

In Arizona and on the national stage, voucher proponents tend to stick to a standard sales pitch. Taxpayer-funded vouchers, they argue, create much-needed opportunities — opening doors to a higher caliber of education, more individualized attention, and escape from failing schools.

Unfortunately, reality looks much different. Last November, the RAND Corporation published a study of Arizona’s universal voucher program funded by the Walton Family Foundation, a conservative organization that has traditionally backed pro-charter and pro-privatization efforts. That study — made even more credible by the motivations of its funders — tells a damning story about what Arizona’s voucher program has become.

According to the RAND study, students who were privately educated before accepting a voucher comprise 70 percent of the program’s beneficiaries. Students with disabilities, 60 percent of voucher recipients before the program became universal, now comprise less than 20 percent of beneficiaries. These numbers indicate that vouchers have not meaningfully expanded access to private education — nor are they primarily benefiting students with disabilities whose needs cannot be met in public schools.

Notably, Arizona’s voucher program has no income cap, which has led to a disproportionate share of voucher dollars going to the state’s wealthiest families. Recent news reports have found

clusters of voucher participants in the Paradise Valley suburb of Phoenix — a community known for million-dollar houses and great wealth. On average, Arizona voucher recipients are wealthier, whiter, and more likely to live in great public school districts than other students.

When low-income families apply for Arizona's voucher system, they often find that it provides little more than the illusion of choice. In Phoenix, tuition at prestigious private schools can run more than \$20,000 per year, leaving the average voucher recipient to make up a \$13,000 funding gap. For a family living at the poverty line, that cost is insurmountable. Private schools can also turn away voucher recipients based on almost any criteria, including perceived class, family marital status, or faith. Increasingly, school choice policies mean that schools choose their students, instead of the other way around.

Low-income families and families of students with disabilities who surmount these obstacles and enroll in private education are often disappointed. Public schools, which must serve all students under federal law, are often better suited to providing intensive special education, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs, or wraparound support than private programs.

As a teacher, I have seen countless students who accepted voucher dollars, only to return to their neighborhood school a few months after the start of the school year. At that point, voucher dollars have been disbursed, per-pupil funding has been allocated, and the local public school receives no support for new students they are legally required to educate.

It should also be noted that rural families have been almost entirely left behind by Arizona's voucher program. More than 90 percent of Arizona private schools are in urban or suburban areas, leaving few choices in rural communities. While rural families have theoretical access to the same online programs as their counterparts, limited federal investment in high-speed internet — especially in Tribal areas — makes that option essentially moot.

The voucher system has additionally provided a convenient political excuse to avoid much-needed investments in Arizona public schools. Last August, our union won an eight-year-long legal battle that challenged Arizona's consistent underfunding of school capital projects. Instead of settling that lawsuit and injecting much-needed funding into crumbling public schools, Republican legislative leaders have already announced plans to appeal.

In the end, the rising cost of Arizona's voucher program and diminishing investments in public education have left many students with fewer choices than before. Over the last three years, dozens of districts have been forced to lay off educators and close schools — partially a result of declining birth rates, but also because, \$1 billion in public school funding is diverted to private school vouchers each year. As schools close, communities lose major employers and students lose real choice.

### **Diamond rings and lingerie: waste, fraud, and abuse in Arizona's voucher program**

Among the committee members today, I know that we have many who are concerned about waste, fraud, and abuse in government programs. As you evaluate the landscape of school choice, I urge you to consider that Arizona's program is a cautionary tale about the consequences of poorly regulated K-12 voucher systems.

Two years after Arizona's voucher program went into effect, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, a Republican, announced that his department would provide approve all voucher requests under \$2,000. The predictable result was a maelstrom of waste, fraud, and abuse. Taxpayer dollars were spent on diamond rings, lingerie, vacations, and other purchases with little or no educational value.

As a teacher, I worry about the future of children in these households — but I am also outraged that vouchers are widening the gap between the haves and the have-nots. In the Isaac School District, where I teach, our big field trip each year was a trip to the local library, on the public bus. In voucher families, taxpayer dollars are covering the cost of ski lift tickets and trips to SeaWorld.

At a time when many families are struggling to make ends meet, Arizona's voucher system has become our own Sheriff Nottingham — robbing working-class taxpayers to pay the rich, and effecting an extraordinary transfer of wealth from the middle class to the top one percent.

### **Foreseeable tragedies: safety lapses in Arizona's voucher system**

Finally, I will briefly discuss the most tragic and troubling part of Arizona's Wild West approach to school vouchers.

In keeping with the wishes of voucher proponents who seek less government involvement in education, Arizona has taken an almost entirely hands-off approach to student safety and academic accountability in voucher-funded schools. They are not required to conduct background checks on their educators, nor do they need to be accredited or administer any assessments. A private school operating in bad faith could provide almost no education to its students and still receive tens of thousands of dollars in taxpayer dollars annually.

In the last several years, we have seen a number of egregious safety lapses in voucher-funded programs. Here are two examples:

- Students with disabilities at a micro-school in Kingman, Arizona, were forced to call authorities for rescue after school administrators led them on a hike in extreme temperatures with insufficient water.
- The voucher-supported Primavera Online School, a former charter school shuttered by the state for dismal academic performance, plans to reopen with neither attendance nor assessment requirements while continuing to pay the owners millions of dollars a year.

I am deeply concerned that we will hear more stories of students who have been excluded, abused, or neglected in voucher schools that offer limited opportunities and operate with profit — not students — as their North Star.

In closing, I want to underscore that every child in our country deserves to attend a great school that prepares them for the future. I hope that my testimony about Arizona's experience provides insight into why vouchers are not the way to achieve that goal.