

GUEST COLUMNISTS

## Opinion: School vouchers expand opportunities for families

By [Chris Fay](#), Guest Columnist

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GUEST COLUMNIST

**Chris Fay**



Dr. Chris Fay is president and CEO of Catholic Schools of Memphis.

Recent conversations about education funding in Tennessee have grown louder, particularly around the issue of school “vouchers.” Some claim that funding for public schools has been diverted to pay for private education, leaving districts scrambling to meet student needs.

However, public school funding in Tennessee has not been cut by a single dollar because of education choice programs. In fact, the state is dedicated to allocating nearly \$7 billion annually to K-12 public education support. These investments are directed to teacher compensation, school infrastructure and innovative models that prepare students for the future.

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In Gov. Bill Lee’s 2022 State of the State Address, he proposed more than \$1 billion in new recurring funding, including:

- \$750 million for a new student-based funding formula – Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA),

- \$500 million for innovative school models,
- \$200 million to move schools out of floodplains,
- more than \$124 million for teacher pay

This is not the profile of a state abandoning its public schools.

At the same time, Tennessee has expanded opportunities for families through the Education Freedom Act (EFS) and the Education Savings Account (ESA) program. The EFS is a statewide scholarship initiative that provides funds directly to families for approved private or faith-based education. The ESA program, available for households in Davidson, Shelby and Hamilton counties, offers state-funded scholarships to help students access nonpublic schools.

The former allocated \$145.9 million for scholarships and \$2.7 million in administrative costs, while simultaneously directing \$198.4 million for teacher bonuses and \$77.2 million for K-12 public school infrastructure.

Unlike voucher programs in other states, Tennessee's legislation includes specific protections for public school systems. When the EFS was passed, lawmakers added a hold-harmless provision for local education entities. That means even if a student leaves a district to use an EFS, the district continues to receive the same funding for at least a transition period. EFS funds come from general state revenues, not from the TISA pool, certifying that local budgets are not reduced.

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In other words, districts do not lose funding when students exercise choice. They may lose students, but not the dollars that support them.

So, why the confusion? One reason may be the natural tension between tradition and innovation in education. Public school leaders are right to advocate for resources that meet their students' needs. But to suggest that school choice programs drain public schools is misleading and distracts from the real conversation we should be having —

how do we give every child in Tennessee access to a high-quality education, regardless of ZIP code, income or circumstance?

Families benefit when they have access to educational options that meet their children's needs. For many, financial aid or scholarships make those opportunities possible. Programs like Tennessee's ESA expand access even further, especially for low-income households who might otherwise feel excluded from private or faith-based education. By widening opportunity, choice ensures that more children can find the learning environment where they thrive.

This conversation shouldn't be pitting public schools against private schools. Instead, let's focus on recognizing that families deserve the freedom to choose the learning environment that best fits their child. For some, that's the neighborhood public school; for others, it's a charter, magnet program or faith-based school. Each plays a role in the larger educational ecosystem and contributes to the future of our state.

Tennessee has chosen a balanced path that makes unprecedented investments in public schools while creating pathways for families to choose private education. This isn't a zero-sum game. It's an all-of-the-above strategy that acknowledges the diverse needs of students and empowers parents to make decisions accordingly.

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Opinion: The most common diagnosis in Memphis? A broken heart.

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Our community deserves clarity in this debate. Funding for public schools has not been cut. In fact, it has grown. Choice programs are additive, not subtractive — offering families more opportunities, not fewer.

And at the end of the day, this is about the students. Every child deserves an excellent education, and every family deserves the right to choose. Tennessee is showing that we can do both.

**TOPICS**

**SCHOOL VOUCHERS   EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNTS   GUEST COLUMNS**

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