

Guess which state spends the most public funds on private and religious school education. Hint: Betsy DeVos has a house there.

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Education Secretary Betsy DeVos just announced she is backing Senate legislation that would create the first federally funded school tax credit, so it seems like a good time to see which states spend public money to send kids to private and religious schools — and how much.

To be clear, the legislation has virtually no chance of passing Congress; Democrats control the House, and most of them wouldn't support it. A similar idea couldn't muster enough enthusiasm a few years ago when Republicans controlled the House and the Senate.

It is worth noting that DeVos opposes federal involvement in education — she once said “government sucks” — and she believes that choice programs, like all education, are best at the state and local level. She couldn't, of course, oppose a federal choice program. But she isn't likely to appreciate federal restrictions that would necessarily be attached to the money.

[‘Government really sucks’ and five other principles promoted by Betsy DeVos](#)

Tax credits are just one of the programs that fall under the branch of the “school choice” movement that seeks to use public money to send children to private and religious schools — even when those schools can legally discriminate against LGBTQ students and other groups of students. There are, however, differences in how the programs work throughout the country, structured according to the laws of each state.

The issue is central to the national education debate. Supporters say families should have options for their children. Opponents say it is unconstitutional to use public funds for religious education and that these programs drain resources from public school districts that educate most of America's children. The Supreme Court is expected to soon get a case that addresses the constitutionality of voucher programs.

Under tax credit scholarship programs, donors take tax deductions for contributions they make to a state-sanctioned entity that distributes those contributions to qualified students who then use the money for private and religious schools.

There are, [according to the pro-choice nonprofit group EdChoice](#), 23 tax-credit scholarship programs in 18 states: Alabama, Arizona (4), Florida (2), Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Montana, New Hampshire, Nevada, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania (2), Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota and Virginia.

EdChoice is an Indiana-based nonprofit with a mission to privatize the public education system through a universal voucher system. (You can learn about its philosophy in this [1995 op-ed written for The Washington Post](#) by Milton Friedman, who funded the predecessor organization that became EdChoice. The headline: “Public schools: Make them private.”)

The legislation supported by DeVos — being introduced by Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.) and Rep. Bradley Byrne (R-Ala.) — would provide a 100 percent federal tax credit for donations by individuals or companies that help send children to private school. Spending on the program would be capped at \$5 billion.

Voucher programs give families a portion of the public funding that would be used for a child's education in a public school and allow them to use the money in the form of a voucher for tuition at private and religious schools. EdChoice says there are 25 voucher programs in 15 states: Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana (2), Maine, Maryland, Mississippi (2), New Hampshire, North Carolina (2), Ohio (5), Oklahoma, Utah, Vermont, Wisconsin (4). The nation's capital also has a program, and it is the only one funded by the federal government.

Educational savings accounts are personal accounts created by a state for parents to use for a range of educational costs, including private school tuition and fees, private tutoring, online learning programs and other uses. The money comes from state education funds. EdChoice says five states offer such funds, which often are given to families by debit card. They are Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina and Tennessee.

DeVos has made clear that her view of educational success by states is how much “choice” parents are given.

So which state spends the most on programs that use public money for private education? As it turns out, it isn't Michigan, the home state of billionaire DeVos. She spent decades there trying to expand choice, succeeding with charter schools but not voucherlike programs.

The state that spends the most is one in which she maintains a vacation home. It's Florida, which became a school choice pioneer under Jeb Bush when he was governor from 1999 to 2007.

DeVos and Bush have been school choice allies for years, and her department has hired key officials with links to Bush. She has repeatedly called Florida a national model for choice. According to EdChoice, Florida spends by far the most — in terms of percentage of budget and in dollars — on school choice.

In its latest ranking, published in January, EdChoice said Florida spent \$969.6 million on educational savings accounts, vouchers and tax credit programs in 2016, the latest available data. That was 3.69 percent of the state's combined program and public K-12 expenditures. EdChoice used state public expenditure data from the [U.S. Census Bureau's 2016 Public Elementary-Secondary Education Finance Data](#) report.

New Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) just announced a tax credit program that would boost that spending significantly if the legislature, as expected, passes it. Florida has been at the top of the list for a number of years.

When looking at dollars spent, Ohio was second, spending \$324.1 million, and Wisconsin was third, with \$271.9 million. But Arizona was second in terms of percentage, at 2.83 percent of its total K-12 expenditures. Wisconsin was third, with 2.66 percent.

Here's the top 10 in the EdChoice list, and [you can see the entire thing here](#). The numbers in the parentheses after the state name indicate its ranking from the previous year.

1. [Florida](#) (1) ESA, voucher, tax-credit scholarship | **3.69 percent of Florida's combined program and public K-12 current expenditures** | \$969.6 million
2. [Arizona](#) (4) ESA, tax-credit scholarship | **2.83 percent of Arizona's combined program and public K-12 current expenditures** | \$211.8 million
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3. [Wisconsin](#) (3) Voucher | **2.66 percent of Wisconsin's combined program and public K-12 current expenditures** | \$271.9 million
4. [Vermont](#) (2) Voucher | **2.60 percent of Vermont's combined program and public K-12 current expenditures** | \$44.1 million
5. [Maine](#) (5) Voucher | **2.03 percent of Maine's combined program and public K-12 current expenditures** | \$51.7 million
6. [Indiana](#) (6) Voucher, tax-credit scholarship | **1.72 percent of Indiana's combined program and public K-12 current expenditures** | \$174.5 million
7. [Ohio](#) (7) Voucher | **1.55 percent of Ohio's combined program and public K-12 current expenditures** | \$324.1 million
8. [District of Columbia](#) (8) Voucher | **1.55 percent of D.C.'s combined program and public K-12 current expenditures** | \$15.8 million
9. [Louisiana](#) (9) Voucher, tax-credit scholarship | **0.64 percent of Louisiana's combined program and public K-12 current expenditures** | \$47.1 million
10. [Georgia](#) (10) Voucher, tax-credit scholarship | **0.43 percent of Georgia's combined program and public K-12 current expenditures** | \$74.8 million

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