



GUEST COLUMN

## Local View: Vouchers hurt rural schools

By Allen Pratt, National Rural Education Association executive director  
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Rural schools have long been the backbone of communities across Nebraska, providing generations of children with the education and skills needed to sustain local farms, businesses and economies. However, these schools now face a new threat — a proposed voucher program that risks starving them of vital public funding.

As a seasoned educator hailing from rural Tennessee, I am intimately familiar with the unique challenges that small rural districts face. These districts, with their limited student population, struggle to match the comprehensive programs and services offered by larger urban school systems, all while operating on a tight budget.

The fixed costs of maintaining infrastructure and transportation services remain constant for rural districts, even as enrollment changes, often necessitating a heavy reliance on local property taxes.

A voucher program in Nebraska's LB1402 legislation aims to divert state funds to private school scholarships, as has occurred in other states like Tennessee, Iowa, Oklahoma and Arkansas. While marketed as "school choice," the reality is that these programs predominantly benefit families already in private schools, with studies showing little academic benefit for voucher recipients.

Crucially, in a vast, rural state like Nebraska, many families could not access these private school options even with a voucher. Private schools operate in less than half the state's counties with many concentrated in urban and suburban areas. Extensive travel requirements would make vouchers inaccessible for many rural students.

Once introduced, these voucher programs have quickly expanded in other states through well-financed, nationally based initiatives aimed at privatizing public education. In Iowa, the [cost of taxpayer-funded vouchers](#) exceeded initial projections by 18% this year and is projected to more than double over the next three years. Two-thirds of Iowa students who received a private school voucher this year were already enrolled in a private school.

In terms of achievement, numerous studies show that students who leave public schools with a voucher sometimes struggle. In Louisiana, academic results in a statewide voucher program showed [harmful impacts](#). And a study of [elementary and middle school students in](#)

[Indiana](#) revealed that those in their first year of attending a private school lost ground in math when compared to their public school peers.

In Nebraska, the voucher program proposed in LB1402 would supersede legislation passed only last year and directly fund grants to award private school scholarships as determined by an outsourced program administrator. The annual appropriation would come from taxes collected across all 93 counties, with the scholarships likely to go to where most of the private schools are — in the larger towns and cities.

Instead of diverting funds to unproven voucher schemes, Nebraska should be directing its resources toward strengthening its rural public schools — the lifeblood of their communities.

By increasing funding for vocational, STEM and other specialized programs, we can better cater to the unique needs of our rural learners and local economies. It's time to reaffirm that public dollars belong in public schools, where they can be held accountable and serve the greater good.

The education system in rural Nebraska is already on shaky ground. Introducing a voucher program would only serve to further destabilize it. I implore state lawmakers to stand up for Nebraska's public schools, the backbone of our small towns and family farms, by rejecting this ill-advised proposal. The future of Nebraska's rural communities hangs in the balance.

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