

NUMBER 6-2026

# CPP REPORT

February 2026



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## Education Savings Accounts in Texas: What Houstonians Expect from SB2 Vouchers

The passage of Senate Bill 2 (SB2) substantially changes the landscape of school choice in Texas, introducing “Education Savings Accounts” (also referred to as “Private School Vouchers”) as a new option for families. Using Wave 3 of the University of Houston Hobby School’s SPACE City Panel, this report provides a survey-based snapshot of perceptions of the policy in Greater Houston. The analysis examines residents’ beliefs about who will apply for and receive funds through SB2; their own interest in applying; and perceptions of how the program will affect Texas communities and their public schools. Overall, Houstonians substantially over-estimate the scale of the voucher program and believe that funds will flow to relatively wealthy families, despite statutory limits and provisions that prioritize children from low- and middle-income families.



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## Key Takeaways

1. **Houstonians substantially over-estimate the number of children who will receive funding to attend a private school through SB2 during the 2026-27 school year:** The \$1 billion in funding allocated by SB2 is sufficient to subsidize private school attendance for fewer than 100,000 children in the upcoming school year. On average, respondents estimate that over ten times as many children will receive subsidies through the program in 2026, equivalent to about 1.5 million Texas students using SB2 funding to attend a private school in the fall.
2. **The public believes that a far greater share of funds will flow to higher-income families than the law allows:** On average, respondents estimated that 38.2% of children receiving SB2 funding would be from families earning over five times the federal poverty line (over \$160,750 for a family of four), nearly double SB2's statutory maximum requiring that no more than 20% of funding can flow to students from higher-income families.
3. **Houstonians see potential costs and benefits of subsidizing private school attendance:** Respondents were more than twice as likely to express agreement (47.9%) than disagreement (21.6%) with the statement "Overall, ESAs will hurt Texas public schools", but they were also more likely to express agreement (41.1%) than disagreement (32.3%) with the statement "Overall, ESAs will give students access to better educational opportunities."
4. **Views on what policymakers should do next are split:** Houstonians are nearly evenly divided as to whether access to Educational Savings Accounts/Private School Vouchers should be expanded (34.5% strongly or somewhat agree), limited (36.6% strongly or somewhat agree), or eliminated (36.7% strongly or somewhat agree).

In the lead up to Senate Bill 2's implementation, which will introduce Education savings accounts (ESAs) (also referred to as "Private School Vouchers" [PSVs]) to the state's school choice landscape, participants in the University of Houston Hobby School's SPACE City Panel provide a survey-based snapshot of Houstonians' perceptions of the policy. While the text of Senate Bill 2 (SB2) outlines the rules and goals of the education savings account program, including fiscal caps, prioritization rules, and eligibility rules for participating students and schools, our survey was fielded between December 2025 and January 2026, before implementation began. Survey respondents' perceptions of SB2 reflect their expectations rather than lived experiences of the voucher program. The analysis examines residents' beliefs about who will apply for and receive funds through the bill; their own interest in applying; and perceptions of how the program will affect Texas communities and public schools. In the following sections, we analyze their survey responses.

## Overview of SB2

In Spring 2025, the Texas legislature passed SB2, establishing the state's first education savings account program when Governor Greg Abbott signed the bill into law on May 3, 2025. ESAs/PSVs subsidize education-related expenses of participating children, including tuition and fees to attend a private school or homeschooling costs, among other educational expenses ([Texas Legislature, 2025](#)). Funds are deposited into an account controlled by a student's parent(s) or guardian(s), who are required to use the funds only for approved educational expenses.

If more families apply for an ESA than the allotted funds can cover, SB2 requires that ESAs be allocated first to pre-specified priority groups and then by random lottery within oversubscribed groups. Siblings of participating children

receive first priority, and children who previously ceased participation in the program to attend a traditional public school or public charter school (an irrelevant designation during this first year of implementation) receive last priority. Everyone else falls in the second priority category. Within each priority group, ESAs are allocated in the following order:

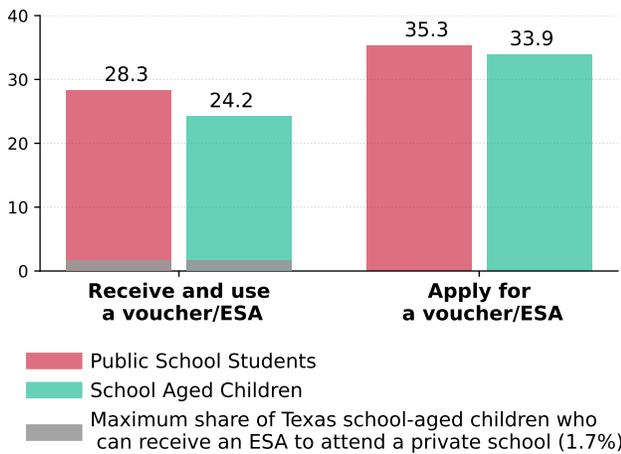
1. Students with disabilities from low- to middle-income families (up to five times the federal poverty line, or \$160,750 for a family of four)
2. Students without disabilities from low- and lower-middle-income families (up to twice the federal poverty line, or \$64,300 for a family of four)
3. Students without disabilities from middle-income families (between two and five times the federal poverty line, or \$64,300-\$160,750 for a family of four)
4. Students from higher-income families (more than five times the federal poverty line, or over \$160,750 for a family of four)

SB2 allocates \$1 billion to fund ESAs/PSVs during the 2026-27 school year, setting the standard ESA allotment for qualifying students at \$10,474, or 85% of the average per-pupil state and local expenditure in Texas public schools as calculated by the Texas Education Agency ([Texas Freedom Accounts, 2026](#)).

## How many students will SB2 serve?

Houstonians expect 35.3% of public school children to apply for a voucher and 28.3% of public school children to receive a voucher to attend a private school in Fall 2026. With over 5.5 million public school children in Texas, this would imply that Houstonians expect over 1.5 million public school stu-

dents to leave for private schools in the fall (Texas Education Agency, 2025). At a minimum cost of \$10,474 per ESA, a program of this scale would require over \$15 billion in additional funding. While the actual number of Texans who are interested in ESAs will only become clear after applications open on February 4, 2026, the fixed \$1 billion in funding allocated toward the program means that a maximum of 95,474 students (representing about 1.7% of Texas public school students) can receive an ESA for the 2026-27 school year, before accounting for costs related to program administration or supplementary funds to which students with disabilities are entitled (and ignoring the \$2,000 subsidies available to home-schooled students through the program).<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 1** Houstonians’ expectations of the scale of the voucher program (share of school-aged children who will apply vs. receive vs. the statutory maximum)

As shown in Figure 1, respondents believe that significantly more students will apply for and receive an ESA/PSV than the statutory maximum. Respondents believe 35.3% of public-school students will apply and 28.3% will receive a subsidy through SB2. Expectations of interest and subsidy receipt among all school-aged children are slightly lower at 33.9% and 24.2%, but still well above the statutory maximum of 1.7%.

Furthermore, SB2 specifies that students with disabilities (defined as students who would receive special education services if they attended public school) are eligible to receive the standard ESA allotment of \$10,474 plus “[...]the amount the school district in which the child would otherwise be enrolled would be entitled to receive for the child calculated based on the child’s individualized education program [IEP][...]”, with a cap of \$30,000 per year (Texas Legislature, 2025). In 2024, about 15% of Texas public school students received special education services based on an IEP (Texas Education Agency, 2025). Since students with disabilities from low- and middle-income families form the first priority group for allocating ESAs in the event of an over-

subscribed program, it is not unreasonable to expect that students with disabilities will be over-represented among ESA recipients relative to their share of school-aged children in Texas. However, even if students with disabilities are proportionally represented among program beneficiaries (a conservative fiscal assumption) and 15% of ESA recipients are entitled to supplementary funding based on their IEP, if the average supplementary award is \$4,000, this would further reduce the total number of ESA recipients, capping the size of the program at 89,327 before accounting for program administration costs.<sup>2</sup>

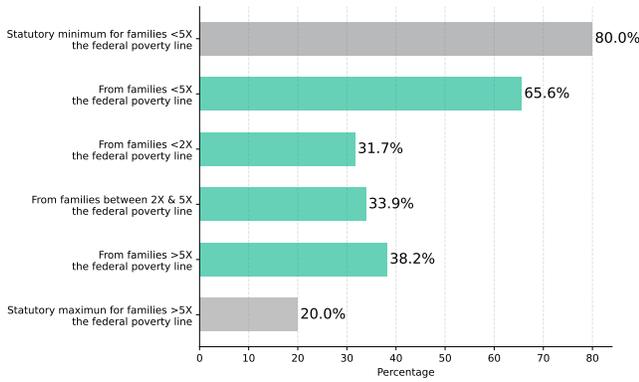
### Who will receive SB2 subsidies?

To understand public perceptions of how benefits from SB2 are likely to be distributed across the state, we asked respondents to estimate the share of ESA recipients who they expect will fall into different categories of family income, prior schooling history, geography, and service eligibility.

#### Family Income

We asked Houstonians what share of voucher recipients they expect to come from A) families earnings less than twice the federal poverty line (under \$64,300 for a family of four); B) Between twice and five times the federal poverty level (between \$64,300 and \$160,750 for a family of four); and C) More than five times the federal poverty level (over \$160,750 for a family of four). While the final distribution of participants’ family incomes cannot be predicted with precision, two provisions of SB2 favor lower- and middle-income families. First, applications from lower- and middle-income families are prioritized if the voucher program receives more applications than the allotted funding can cover. Second, SB2 specifies that the share of funding spent on students from families with incomes more than five times the federal poverty level (over \$160,750 for a family of four) “may not exceed 20 percent of the amount of money appropriated from the program fund for that school year”, functionally capping the share of participants from higher-income families near 20%.<sup>3</sup> Notably, this provision, unlike many others, expires in September 2027, so future legislatures will have to make an active decision about whether to maintain the cap on funding for students from higher-income families.

Figure 2 shows that respondents believe students from higher-income families will receive a disproportionate share of SB2 funding. Houstonians estimated that students from these higher-income families will represent nearly twice as large a share of ESA recipients (38.2%) as the maximum allowed by statute (~20%). Respondents expect the remaining participants to be closely divided among the low and lower-middle income families (31.7%) and middle-income families (33.9%).<sup>4</sup> In practice, the minimum share of funding flowing to families earning below five times the federal poverty line should be close to 80%, substantially higher than the 65.6% of beneficiaries respondents believe will come from families with income below this threshold.



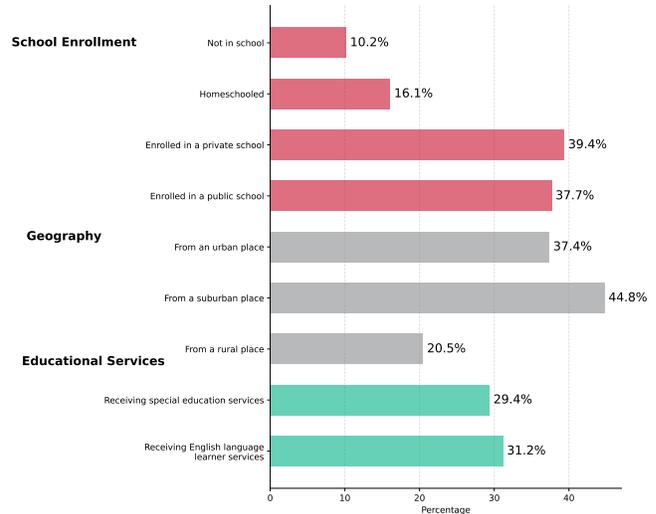
**Figure 2** Houstonians’ expectations of who will receive the vouchers by family income range versus statutory limits

### Prior School Enrollment

We asked respondents what share of SB2 beneficiaries they expect are currently A) enrolled in a public school, B) enrolled in a private school, C) homeschooled, or D) not in school. Figure 3 shows that Houstonians expect ESA beneficiaries to be nearly evenly divided between current public school students (37.7%) and current private school students (39.4%), despite the fact that in Texas, where surveys estimate roughly 260,000 K-12 students are enrolled in private schools across the state, public school students outnumber private school students more than 20-to-1 (Barba and Crusius, 2022). Additionally, the text of SB2 requires that “[i]n allocating money under the program[…], the comptroller shall ensure children who were enrolled in a school district or open-enrollment charter school for at least 90 percent of the preceding school year are prioritized.”

The growing role of homeschooling is reflected in Houstonians’ expectation that 16.1% of students who use an SB2 subsidy to attend a private school in Fall 2026 will be currently homeschooled students. An important factor in the scale of participation in the SB2 subsidy program will be how many awards are allocated to homeschooled students, who are only eligible for up to \$2,000 to offset the costs of their education, less than 20% of the standard allocation for students who use their ESA attend a private school. If, as is extremely unlikely, all \$1 billion were allocated toward homeschooling, the allocated funding could subsidize up to 500,000 homeschooled students.

Finally, Houstonians expect that 10.2% of ESA recipients do not currently attend school in Texas, likely reflecting the reasonable expectation that a large share of recipients will be entering school for the first time as Kindergarteners or Prekindergarteners, who currently represent 6.5% and 4.5% of students in Texas public schools, respectively Texas Education Agency (2025).



**Figure 3** Houstonians’ expectations of the characteristics of voucher recipients

### Geography

We asked respondents what share of SB2 beneficiaries they expect to come from A) urban, B) suburban, or C) rural places. Houstonians expect broad participation in the program across Texas, predicting 44.8% of subsidies to be awarded to suburban students, 37.4% to urban students, and 20.5% to rural students. While rural students are predicted to receive the smallest absolute share of funds, rural Texans represented about 16% of the state’s population during the most recent decennial census. Thus, Houstonians actually expect rural communities to be slightly over-represented among SB2 subsidy recipients (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Historically, rural Republican legislators have joined Texas Democrats to oppose expansions of private school choice, citing the limited private school infrastructure in their districts and the economic importance of public schools, which are often the largest employers in rural areas (Despart and Lopez, 2023; Martínez-Beltrán, 2023).

### Educational Services

Respondents expect substantial participation from students who are eligible for special education and emergent bilingual services. Expectations of the share of SB2 subsidy recipients who will be eligible for special education (an expected 29.4% of recipients) or receiving English language learning supports (31.2%) substantially exceeds the share of Texas public school students who have an identified disability (15.4%) or are emergent bilingual (24.3%) (Texas Education Agency, 2025).

Students with disabilities from low- and middle-income families comprise the first priority group for SB2 subsidies. If a large number of income-qualified students with disabilities apply, it is possible that this group of students is sub-

stantially over-represented among ESA recipients during the first year of implementation. Consider that roughly 15% of Texas students have an identified disability with an IEP and that 77.3% of Texas households earn less than \$150,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024a; Texas Education Agency, 2025). Using these numbers for a back-of-the-envelope calculation suggests that if income-qualifying students with disabilities are proportionally represented as about 12% of applicants, and SPACE City panel respondents are correct about the level of interest in SB2 subsidies (i.e., that over one million will families apply for an ESA), then a full 100% of vouchers would be awarded to students with disabilities from low- to middle-income families. This would eliminate the possibility of any funding flowing to students from higher-income families and considerably reduce the potential total number of beneficiaries, as each student with a disability is entitled to supplementary funding, as described in the “How many students will SB2 serve?” subsection above.

indicated they expect to receive funding to attend a private school through SB2, but still over eight times more than the maximum share SB2 funding can support, which represents roughly 1.7% of school-aged children or public school students statewide.

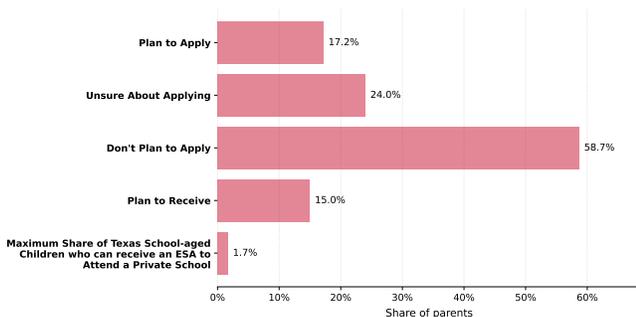
### Expected Costs and Benefits

Finally, we asked respondents a battery of questions about how they expect the subsidies authorized by SB2 will affect different aspects of their community and the state.

As shown in Figure 5, many believe that SB2 will hurt public schools. We asked respondents whether they agree or disagree with the statement “Overall, the education savings accounts<sup>5</sup> will hurt Texas public schools.” 47.9% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that the ESA policy will hurt Texas public schools, 30.5% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 21.6% strongly or somewhat disagreed.<sup>6</sup>

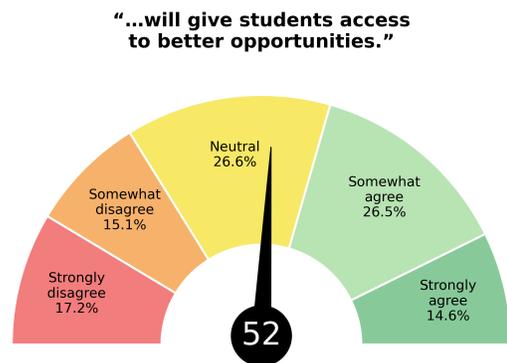
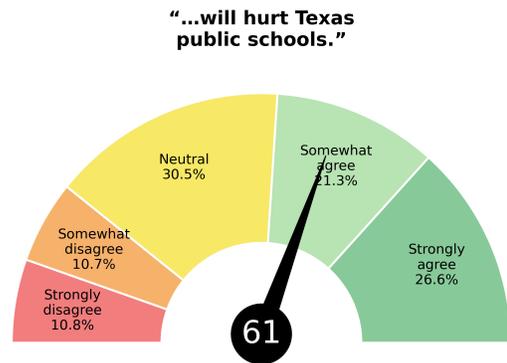
### How many Houstonians will apply?

While the majority of questions asked Houstonians to forecast other peoples’ future interest and participation in the SB2 subsidy program, for respondents who are the parent or guardian of school-aged children, we also asked whether they themselves plan to apply to the program to help one or more of their children attend a private school during the 2026-27 school year. Most parents (58.7%) do not plan to apply, and only about one-in-six (17.2%) expressed confidence that they would apply. A large minority (24.0%) were unsure about whether they will apply.



**Figure 4** Houston parents’ personal interest in applying for and expectations of receiving a voucher

Conditional on applying, applicants are confident that they are likely to receive an ESA (63.4%), somewhat lower than the ratio of recipients to applicants they forecast for school-aged children in Texas, which implied a 71.4% acceptance rate, or all public school students in Texas, which implied an 80.2% acceptance rate. Among those who expressed a clear intention as to whether they plan to apply, only 15.0% of parents expect to receive funding through SB2 in Fall 2026, a far lower share than the 24.2% of school-aged children in Texas or 28.3% of public school student who respondents

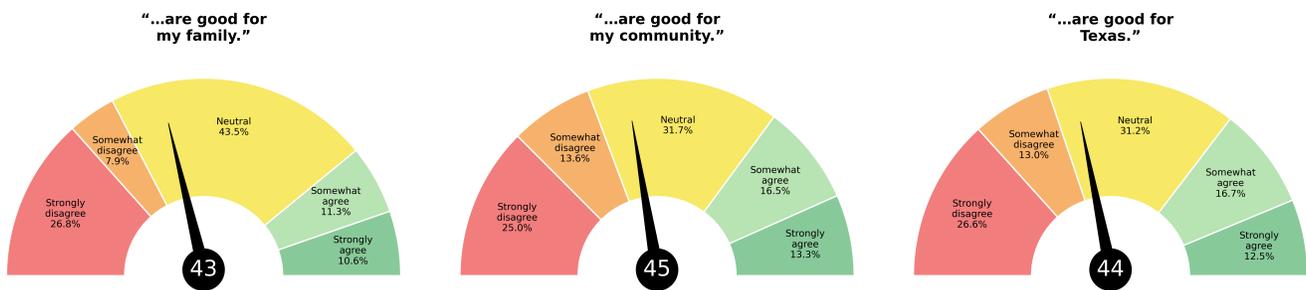


**Figure 5** Houstonians’ expectations for the effects of the voucher program. “Overall ESAs...”

However, many respondents also believe that SB2 will improve students’ access to educational opportunities. We asked respondents whether they agree or disagree with the statement “Overall, the education savings accounts will give students access to better educational opportunities.” 41.1% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that the ESA policy will expand access to educational opportunities, 26.6% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 32.3% strongly or somewhat disagreed. While a larger share focus on the costs of the policy, a plurality of respondents acknowledged this source of likely benefits.

Overall, Figure 6 reveals that respondents were more likely to have negative than positive views of the SB2 subsidy program. We asked whether they believe that overall, the SB2 subsidy program is “[...]good for my family”; “[...]good

for my community”; or “[...]good for Texas.” Respondents viewed the implications for their community and Texas very similarly, with 29.7% strongly or somewhat agreeing that the policy was good for their community, 31.7% neither agreeing nor disagreeing, and 38.5% strongly or somewhat disagreeing. Likewise, 29.1% strongly or somewhat agreed that the policy was good for Texas, 31.2% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 39.6% strongly or somewhat disagreed. Respondents were less sure about the implications for their own family, with 43.5% indicating that they neither agreed nor disagreed that the policy was good for their family, 21.9% strongly or somewhat agreeing, and 34.7% strongly or somewhat disagreeing. This uncertainty aligns with the 24.0% of parents who remain unsure as to whether they expect to apply for funding through SB2 for their own children.



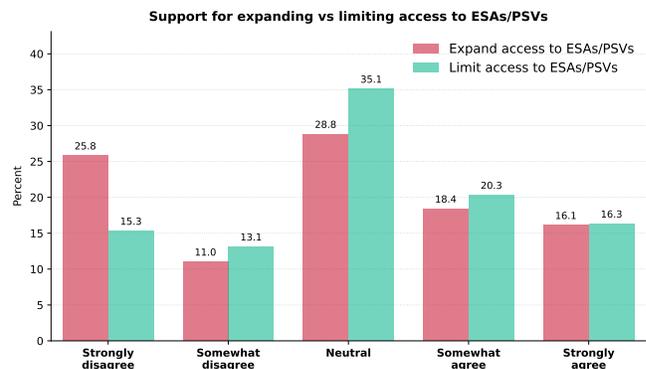
**Figure 6** Houstonians’ overall appraisals of the voucher program. “Overall, ESAs are...”

### What should policymakers do next?

Finally, Houstonians are divided about their hopes for the SB2 subsidy program moving forward. We asked respondents whether they agreed with the statements “Texas should expand access to education savings accounts”; “Texas should limit access to education savings accounts”; and “Texas should end the education savings account program now.” Just over one-third of respondents strongly or somewhat *agreed* with each course of action (34.5% for expand access; 36.6% for limit access; and 36.7% for end the program now). Similar shares strongly or somewhat *disagreed* with each course of action, with modestly higher opposition to program expansion (36.7% for expand access; 28.3% for limit access; and 32.4% for end the program now). Finally, a similar share neither agreed nor disagreed with each course of action (28.8% for expand access; 35.1% for limit access; and 30.9% for end the program now).

Figure 7 shows nearly identical portions of respondents support expanding access to SB2 subsidies (16.1% strongly agree and 18.4% somewhat agree) as support limiting access (16.3% strongly agree and 20.3% somewhat agree). Similar shares were neutral on expansion (28.8%) and limited access (35.1%), but a significantly larger portion

(25.8%) strongly disagree with expanding the program versus limiting the program (15.3%). Future work will examine how support for SB2 subsidies evolves after the program is implemented, including the extent to which continued support relates to renewal of the prioritization rules and maintaining the cap on the share of funding flowing to higher-income families.



**Figure 7** Support for expanding vs limiting access to ESAs/PSVs

## Conclusion

This report provides a snapshot of public perceptions of “Education Savings Accounts” (also referred to as “Private School Vouchers”) leading up to the implementation of SB2. Since no accounts had been allocated at the time the survey was administered, respondents’ perceptions documented by this report reflect their expectations of SB2 rather than their lived experiences of the voucher program.

Houstonians expect that the scale of SB2 subsidies is far greater than the allotted funding can support. While the structure of the bill caps the potential number of participants below 100,000 students, assuming the average student receives the standard allotment of \$10,474, respondents anticipate that over 1.5 million public school students will attend a private school next year via SB2 subsidies, which would require over 15 times as much funding.

Advocates for expanding private school choice may be disappointed to find that SB2 is more of a pilot than a universal voucher program, serving a population that is equivalent to less than 2% of school-aged children in Texas. Others may be relieved to learn that the scale of the voucher program is over an order of magnitude smaller than its public perception in the lead up to SB2’s implementation. Without a substantial increase in allocations, SB2 cannot facilitate the type of mass exodus from public schools that voucher opponents have feared, and prioritization rules should ensure that less than 20% of SB2 funding flows to higher-income families during the 2026-27 school year.

However, Houstonians’ expectations for public interest in SB2 subsidies (they expect over one-third of eligible Texans to apply) and their own individual enthusiasm for the SB2 subsidies (17.2% of parents expect to apply and an additional 24.0% are unsure about whether they will apply) foreshadow that demand for funding will far exceed supply. Even if only one-in-six eligible children applied for a subsidy to attend a private school via SB2 (less than half of perceived interest and a lower bound for Houstonians self-reported intentions to apply), this would represent over 950,000 applications for under 100,000 awards, leaving roughly 90% of interested families shut out of the program (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024b). In short, the public envisions SB2 as a large-scale structural reform, while implementation will reveal its current iteration to be a capacity-constrained, income-targeted program. Whether that revelation moderates opposition or fuels expansion pressure will depend on how visible unmet demand and realized participation become. Furthermore, if the statutory prioritization rules are enforced and early cohorts skew toward lower- and middle-income families, public perceptions that the program primarily benefits higher-income households may weaken.

As the 2027 legislative cycle approaches, voucher advocates may celebrate surplus demand as an argument in favor of immediately and substantially scaling up the ESA program. Recent evaluations of ESA/PSV programs in Indi-

ana, Louisiana, and Ohio provide reason for policymakers to exercise caution in rapidly expanding the policy (Harris, 2026). Indeed, the least successful private school voucher reforms—where participating students experienced significant, persistent declines in academic performance—occurred in the aftermath of expansions where the mechanisms hold participating schools accountable to high standards of quality were not fully developed or there was insufficient capacity-building within high-quality providers (Figlio and Karbownik, 2016; Waddington and Berends, 2018; Abdulkadiroğlu et al., 2018; Erickson et al., 2021).

To build an ESA program that genuinely contributes to serving Texans’ diverse educational needs, lawmakers should favor an incremental, data-driven approach, committing to transparency and accountability for how taxpayer money is used to subsidize private schooling. A large share of Houstonians are open-minded about ESAs—indeed, the most common answer to questions about whether the program is good for their family, their community, or the state was neutral. Constituents will be looking to systems leaders to ensure that students who use ESAs get the quality education every child deserves, and that further investments in ESAs are earned, not handed out.

## Notes

1. SB2 specifies that up to three percent of allocated funds may be used to cover the comptroller’s costs of administering the program, and up to an additional five percent may be used to pay for the services of “certified educational assistance organizations” to hold and distribute funds to participating families. If the comptroller’s office spends the full \$80 million allowed by statute on these purposes, this would further restrict the scale of the program, capping the maximum number of beneficiaries at 87,836 students.
2. Under these assumptions, the maximum number of beneficiaries would fall to 82,181 students if the comptroller’s office spends the full \$80 million allowed by statute, as described in Note 1 above.
3. The language of the bill caps the share of funds allocated to higher-income families at 20%, not the share of participants. In theory, if the full maximum 20% of SB2 funding were allocated to students from higher-income families, students from higher-income families could represent more or less than 20% of the participants, depending on how much money was allocated toward the costs of program administration, the shares of students with disabilities among ESA recipients from higher- and lower-income families, the share of beneficiaries who receive the smaller homeschooling subsidy, and the amounts of supplemental funding received by students with disabilities from higher- and lower-income families through the program. For simplicity, we assume that students from higher-income families cannot represent more than 20% of SB2 beneficiaries during the 2026-27 school year.
4. Note that sums of these mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories do not add up to 100% due to sample weighting and rounding.
5. An embedded experiment randomly varied whether SB2 subsidies were referred to as “education savings accounts” or “private school vouchers.” A preliminary analysis suggests that the language used to describe the subsidies did not affect respondents’ interest in applying or appraisal of the policy impacts following their introduction.
6. 10.746% somewhat disagreed and 10.813% strongly disagreed, so the combined disagreement rounds to 21.6% instead of 21.5%.

## Methodology

**Sample & data collection.** *SPACE City Panel, Wave 3, Dec./Jan. 2025/6; N = 1,549; mode: online. MOE. ±2%.*

**Weights.** *Post-stratified to age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, county. Missing demographics imputed.*

**Exclusions.** *Unless explicit in figure Don't knows and Skipped responses excluded from figures or analyses.*

**Percentages.** *Unless explicit in text of figure, percentages calculated over the total of respondents.*

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