

Indiana Coalition for Public Education

2026 Candidate Guide

**Supporting Traditional Public K-12
Education**



You Have Our Gratitude

Running for office isn't easy. Neither is defending public education against a billionaire-funded lobby dedicated to obliterating it as an institution. As a pro-public-education candidate, you have the deep gratitude of our board, volunteers and members. Our state is in dire need of more legislators willing to stand up for a fully funded public education system.

We realize that education may not be the top issue for many candidates. And even for those for whom it is, so much has happened in Indiana over the past two decades that it can be difficult to keep up. This guide is intended to provide a basic, top-level overview of information we believe is helpful to a candidate seeking office in support of our public schools. In it, you'll find:

- Key terms related to Indiana K-12 education
- A timeline of key events that have brought us to this moment
- Rebuttals to misinformation spread by privatization lobbyists
- A summary of the immediate funding crisis facing our schools
- Issues expected to be prominent in the 2027 legislative session
- Potential talking points for use on the campaign trail

If you review this guide and want to take a deeper dive, we encourage you to visit our website, <https://indianacoalitionforpubliced.org>, for additional information.

Key Terms: Types of Indiana K-12 Education

Traditional Public School: A community school that must, by law, accept all students in its geographic boundaries. In Indiana, traditional public schools are publicly funded using a combination of state, federal, and local tax dollars. They are governed by their local community, nearly always by an elected school board.

Magnet School: A magnet school is a traditional public school that offers specialized curricula and programs not available in traditionally assigned district public schools. Students must apply and be accepted to enroll.

Charter School: A charter school operates on a contract and is authorized by an entity such as a mayor's office or university. The authorizer need not be local. The board is not elected. A charter school receives state funding but operates independently of the local public school district. It is publicly funded and privately run. As of 2024, charter schools can receive local property tax dollars in 4 counties—Lake, Marion, Vanderburgh and St. Joseph—even though charter school boards are private. Beginning in 2028, most charter schools in all counties will qualify for property tax dollars.

Innovation School: An innovation school is similar to a charter school, and some innovation schools can be charter schools. Innovation schools operate under a contract with a nonprofit organization or management team and have operational autonomy but - unlike charter schools - share resources with a partnered public school district. In addition, funding goes through the public school district. The school board must vote to approve new Innovation Network school partners. There are a few ways to become an innovation school—launch as a new school, come in as an existing charter as a new partner, restart a failed school, or convert a public school to an innovation school. Essentially, innovation schools are schools that are outsourced to private entities to run them.

Private School: A private school is founded, conducted, and maintained by a private group rather than by the government. There are accredited and non-accredited private schools in Indiana. Accredited private schools can accept vouchers—subsidies for tuition paid for by taxpayers. Private schools operate under a different set of legal rules than public schools. For example, private religious schools are legally permitted to give preference in admissions and employment based on religion. Additionally, private schools can lawfully use admissions tests and other criteria in ways that would be considered discriminatory in public schools.

Virtual School: A virtual school eschews in-person classrooms, instead providing online instruction and testing. A virtual school can be a traditional public, charter or private school.

Micro School: Micro school is a loosely defined term for a school with very low enrollment. While the acceptable number of students varies from one organization’s definition of micro schools to the next, the term frequently refers to schools with class sizes of fewer than 15 students of varying ages. The schedule and curriculum are tailored to fit the needs of the small, sometimes multi-grade class. Some of these schools are part of a homeschool network.

Homeschool: This refers to education provided at home by a caregiver using personal funds. Indiana establishes effectively no standards or accountability for those who homeschool their children.

Key Terms: Vouchers

Scholarship Granting Organization (SGO): These non-profit entities receive donations from businesses, corporations, or individuals and use those funds to provide scholarships or education assistance to eligible students. These scholarships enable students to attend a qualified private school of their choice. In Indiana, approved SGOs also allow donors to receive a state tax credit equal to 50% of their contribution. As of 2026, there is also a federal-level scholarship granting organization program. It is worth noting that SGOs were originally created because of widespread consensus that the Indiana Constitution prohibited the state from providing taxpayer dollars to private schools. Rather than distribute taxpayer funds, SGOs provided a vehicle to simply not collect taxes on money provided to private schools. While the Indiana Supreme Court has since ruled that vouchers do not violate the Indiana Constitution, SGOs have remained as a means to fund the gap between tuition rates and voucher amounts.

Indiana Choice Scholarship Program: The largest, most well-known taxpayer-funded voucher program in Indiana, the Choice Scholarship Program is funded by the state via the Tuition Support fund, which also funds public and charter schools. Originally created for low-income students, the legislature has repeatedly expanded the program, which is now universal. That means any family, no matter income, can access this type of voucher to help pay for private school. It does not ensure acceptance into a school as private schools are legally allowed to discriminate based on religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation and disability status. There is no funding cap on this voucher program nor the number of private schools in the program. Additionally, while all other schools receiving taxpayer dollars are required to account for how they are spent, private schools receiving vouchers have no such reporting requirements.

Education Savings Account (ESA): This taxpayer-funded voucher account is provided to parents who withdraw their child from public school. It is currently only available for special education students and their siblings. The account can pay for private school tuition or other educational expenses and is administered by ClassWallet. The total program is capped at \$10 million per year.

Key Terms: School Funding

Education Fund: A public school corporation's Education Fund is used to pay for teachers and other in-classroom expenses. It is funded by the state.

Operations Fund: A public school corporation's Operations Fund is used to pay for expenses related to operations, such as transportation, facility maintenance, utilities and insurance. It is funded by local property taxes.

Debt-Service Fund: A public school corporation's Debt-Service Fund is created by the issuance of bonds for items such as new construction and major renovation of facilities. It is repaid via funds from local property taxes.

School Referendum: During even-numbered-year general elections, a public school corporation may add a local ballot question asking its community to approve a higher tax levy amount to help improve schools. For now, only traditional public schools can put referendum questions on the ballot, though beginning in 2028, a school corporation's referendum funds will have to be shared with charter schools within its geographic boundaries.

Construction Referendum: A Construction Referendum funds specific capital projects, such as construction of a new facility or renovations and overall improvements to an existing facility.

Operating Referendum: An Operating Referendum provides additional funds that can be used to supplement the Education or Operating Funds.

Safety Referendum: A Safety Referendum funds specific items related to school safety, such as School Resource Officers (SRO's) or counselors.

The Attack on Public Education: A Timeline

- 2001 Legislation allows the establishment of charter schools.
- 2002 The state's first charter schools open.
- 2008 The General Assembly reforms education, reducing funds available via property taxes and increasing state-level funding from income and sales tax. This change is immediately followed by the Great Recession, leading to significant funding shortfalls for public school corporations due to falling wages and reduced consumer spending.
- 2008 The General Assembly allows public school corporations to seek voter approval for school referendums to increase local property taxes to offset funding shortfalls.
- 2009 The General Assembly takes its first step toward funding private schools by establishing SGOs.
- 2010 The General Assembly imposes circuit breaker tax caps for property taxes, reducing funding of Operations Funds for some public school corporations' operations funds.
- 2011 The General Assembly creates Choice Scholarships (vouchers) with significant restrictions on who can use them.
- 2013 Via *Meredith v. Pence*, the Indiana Supreme Court rules that Choice Scholarships are not unconstitutional.
- 2019 The General Assembly abolishes the elected position of State Superintendent of Public Instruction and replaces it with the unelected position of Secretary of Education, which is appointed by the governor.
- 2025 Describing it as property tax reform, the General Assembly creates an impending severe funding crisis for all public schools across the state via SEA 1.
- 2026 The General Assembly creates the Indianapolis Public Education Corporation (IPEC), a new entity governed by an unelected board appointed by the Indianapolis Mayor. This strips the Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) elected board of all powers over transportation, building and property taxes, including decisions on referendums, transferring those powers to IPEC. Charter school leaders and advocates are appointed to all 9 seats on the IPEC board.
- 2026 After years of diminishing the restrictions on Choice Scholarships, the General Assembly removes the last remaining income-based restrictions, allowing for universal vouchers for any student to attend a private school.
- 2028 Traditional public schools will begin having to divide property tax dollars obtained via referendums with charter schools that have chosen to locate within their geographic boundaries.

Common Misinformation

For decades, privatization lobbyists have flooded both the legislature and the public with a constant flow of misinformation. It should come as no surprise that this has had a dramatic impact, ranging from establishing the framework by which much of the local media reports on education issues to filling legislators with talking points that they can neither explain nor defend when pressed. Some of the most common bits of misinformation follow.

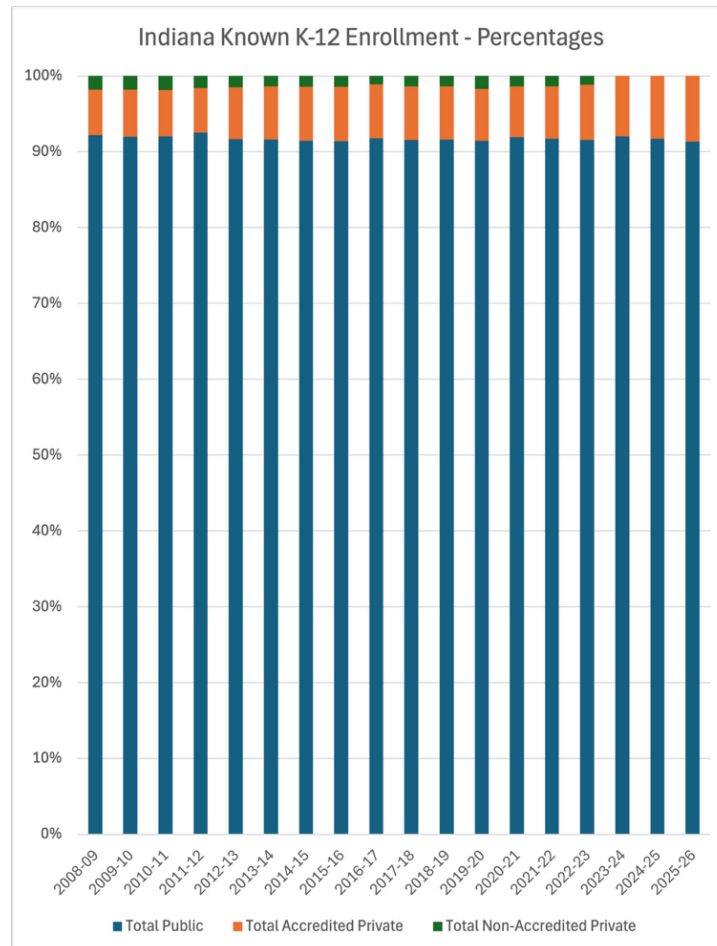
Myth: Vouchers were always intended to be universal.

Fact: When the General Assembly established vouchers, it claimed they would not impact public school funding because they would only be available for students who were leaving a public school and whose families met specific low-income requirements. Instead, the most recent data shows that nearly half a billion dollars went to vouchers in 2024-25.

Myth: Vouchers have caused an exodus from public schools.

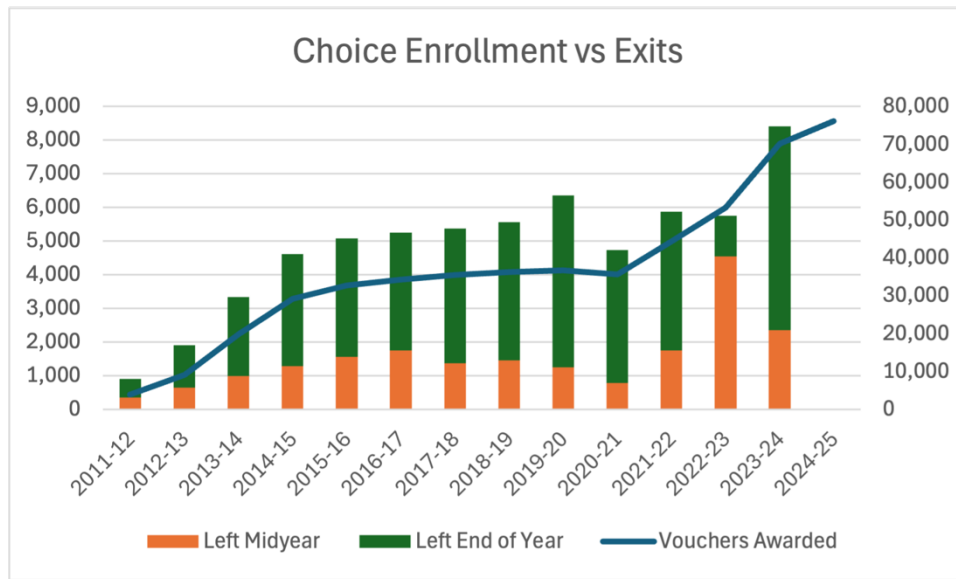
Fact: The total percentage of students who have moved from public schools to private schools has varied, but has generally maxed out at roughly 1%. The Indiana Department of Education does a poor job tracking enrollment at non-accredited private schools, but Figure 1 shows the breakdown of enrollment according to the available data.

Figure 1
Indiana Known K-12 Enrollment: 2008-09 to 2025-26



It's also worth noting that vouchers do seem to cause more parents to try a private school for their student, but many of those move back to their public school. Figure 2 shows the number of students who leave the Choice Scholarship program each year, contrasted with the total number of vouchers awarded as eligibility has expanded to become universal.

*Figure 2
Choice Scholarship Exits and Enrollment*



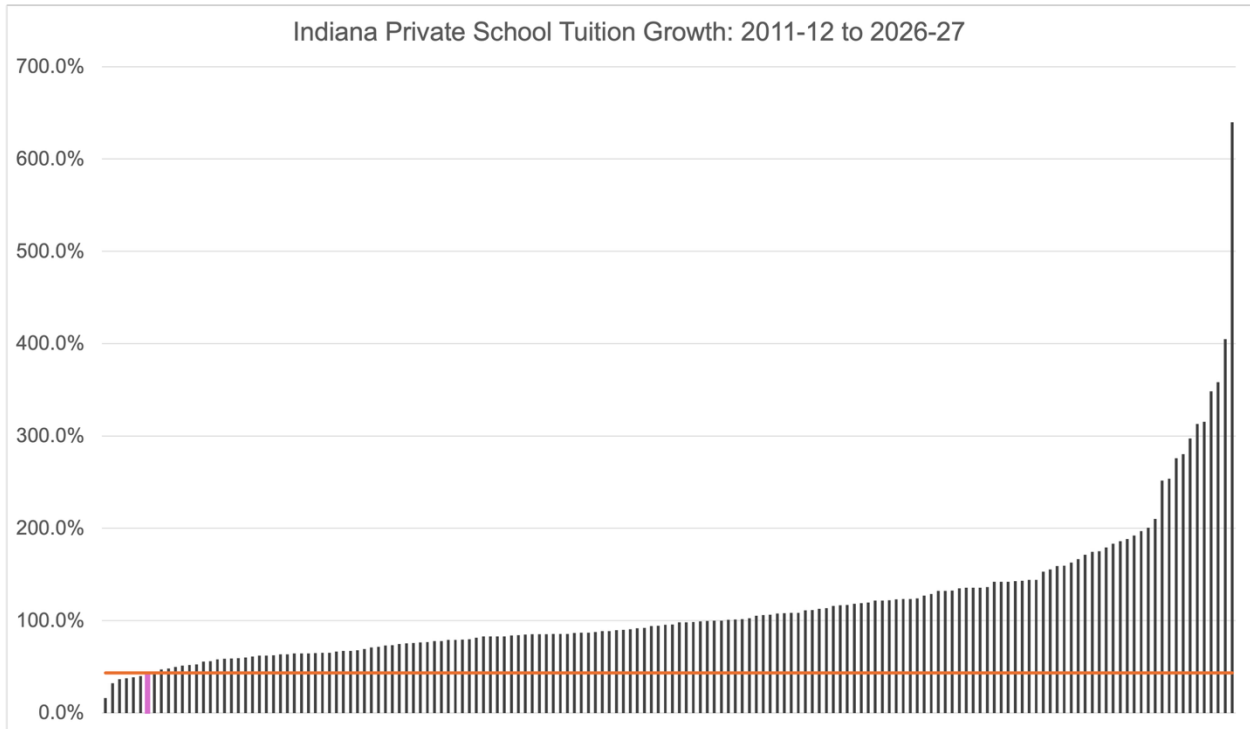
Myth: The state provides more funding than ever to K-12 education.

Fact: Adjusted for inflation, total state funding has remained flat, even as the state has dramatically increased the number of students covered by that funding via universal vouchers. Generally speaking, the amount of money provided to fund ~90% of Hoosier students 15 years ago is now expected to fund close to 100% of them. Furthermore, relative spending on K-12 education is typically measured by stating it as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). By that measure, Indiana's overall K-12 spending has dropped from ~2.5% to ~2.0% of GDP over the past fifteen years. That's equal to an annual reduction of approximately \$3 billion in 2026.

Myth: Vouchers fully go to reducing the costs of private school tuition.

Fact: In response to vouchers, private schools have increased tuition far in excess of the funding provided to public schools, even as they evade any accountability to the state for how they spend taxpayer dollars. For those private schools with enough historical data available, Figure 3 shows how much those schools have increased their tuition since 2011-12. Note that the pink column is the increase in public school funding during that same period. The orange line is the applicable aggregate inflation.

Figure 3
Indiana Private School Tuition Growth: 2011-12 to 2026-27



To put the impact of these tuition increases into perspective, consider tuition at the state’s largest private school in Table 1.

Table 1
Historic and Current Tuition at Indiana’s Largest Private School

	2011-12 School Year	2026-27 School Year
Average Tuition	\$8,336	\$17,350
Average Voucher Amount	\$0	\$6,537
Amount Paid by Parents	\$8,336	\$10,813
Adjusted to Current Dollars	\$11,924	\$10,813

After tuition increases, a \$6,537 voucher is only effectively reducing tuition by \$1,111. Not all private schools are so egregious in the increases, but detailed analysis shows that approximately one third of the state’s voucher expenditures is consumed by tuition increases.

Myth: Charter schools outperform traditional public schools.

Fact: As measured by ILEARN proficiency rates, charter schools underperform the school corporations they directly compete with in 72.8% of instances.

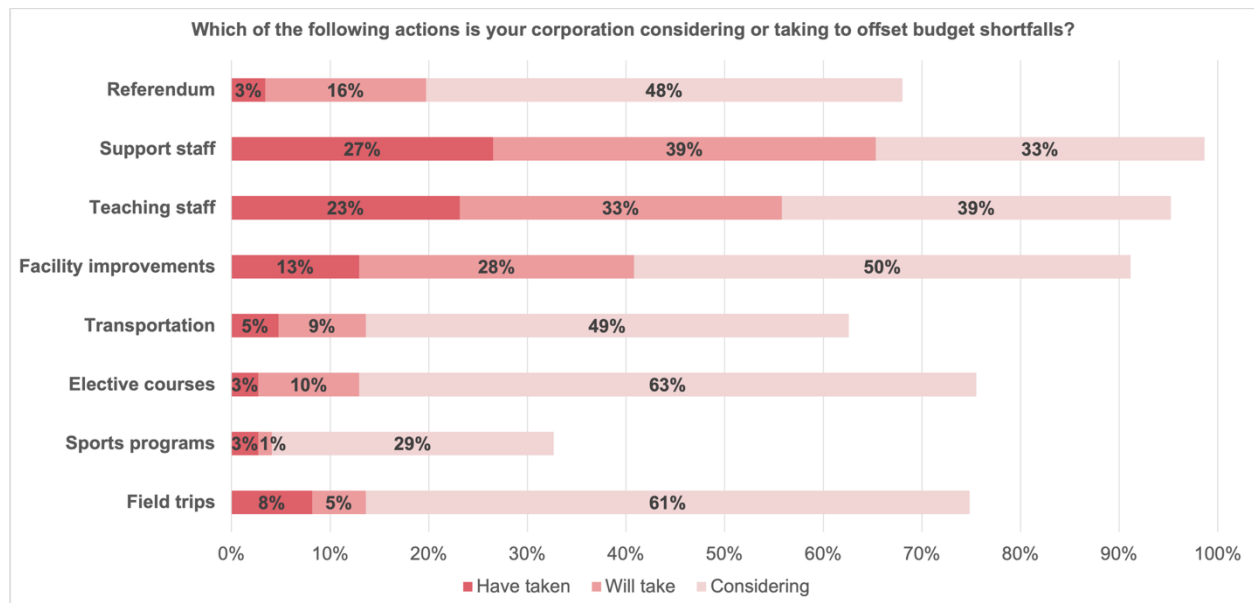
The Impact of Last Year’s Senate Enrolled Act 1

In the 2025 legislative session, the Indiana General Assembly passed Senate Enrolled Act 1 (SEA1). Under the pretense of property tax relief for homeowners, the act provides small savings to a large number of people and large savings to a small number. It does this by dramatically reducing the amount of revenue available to both municipal governments and public school systems. While the state has failed to keep its own funding in line with schools’ rising costs, SEA1 slashes the operating funds that schools can collect locally. It has created an unprecedented statewide crisis for public education.

In the fall of 2025, Indiana Coalition for Public Education surveyed superintendents across the state to establish the size and scope of the impact of SEA1. With 148 of the state’s 290 school corporations participating, the study revealed that schools of all sizes and types are facing a dire situation.

To provide a very brief overview, over 99% of schools reported that SEA1 would have a negative impact on their funding. In response to these shortfalls, school corporations detailed the actions that they had already taken, had committed to taking or were in the process of considering. A summary of these actions is provided in Figure 4.

*Figure 4
Actions Taken in Response to Funding Shortfalls*



Superintendents were provided the opportunity to anonymously share comments on the impact of SEA1 via the survey. These comments included stories of reducing staff, delaying maintenance, renovation, and replacement of buildings and buses and being unsure how to meet rising costs for items such as insurance and utilities. Their full comments can be found in Addendum C of the 2025 School Funding Survey and are worth reviewing in full.

Expected Issues in the 2027 Session

Financial Catastrophe: As mentioned, SEA1 has created an immediate statewide crisis for public schools. The bill phases in certain provisions, meaning that the crisis will worsen each year through 2031. It is hard to predict whether the legislature will seek a solution in the coming session, but it will certainly be under pressure to do so.

Local Control: In the 2026 legislative session, the General Assembly established IPEC, stripping control of IPS from its duly elected board. The privatization lobby has been vocally attacking the very concept of school boards and will be pressuring the legislature to further erode their power in an attempt to reduce local control of public education.

Voucher Expansion: Now that Indiana has universal vouchers for those attending accredited private schools, the privatization lobby's next step is to extend funding to those students attending non-accredited private schools or receiving home schooling. This will likely be attempted via expansion of ESA's. Privatizers consider every dollar that can be siphoned away from public education to be a victory and will be fighting to keep their 16-year winning streak alive.

Key Campaign Talking Points

Public schools are community infrastructure

“Public schools are not just classrooms—they are the backbone of our communities.”

Support with:

- Schools are often the largest employer in a community.
- Strong schools attract families and businesses.
- Property values are tied to school quality.
- When schools weaken, communities weaken.

“Strong schools mean strong towns.”

Local communities deserve local control

“Decisions about our schools should be made by local communities—not politicians far away.”

Support with:

- School boards are elected locally.
- Communities understand their own needs.
- One-size-fits-all state mandates often miss local realities.

This is especially strong in rural Indiana.

“Local schools need local voices.”

Schools need stability—not political disruption

“Schools work best when educators can focus on teaching, not constant political upheaval.”

Support with:

- Teachers need support, not chaos.
- Parents want stability.
- Communities want schools focused on students.

“Less politics. More learning.”

Investing in schools is economic development

“Education funding is not just a school issue—it’s an economic issue.”

Support with:

- Workforce readiness
- Business attraction
- Housing demand
- Community growth
- Population retention

“Education investment is community investment.”