

SB 233 Offers Little Aid to Students in Rural Counties and Would Direct More Public Funding to Private Schools in Metro Areas

Students in many of Georgia's rural communities often face challenges that interfere with learning and academic success. These challenges include poverty, lower education levels among adults, and lack of access to health care providers, childcare, transportation, broadband and other resources that help children and youth thrive. SB 233 does not address these challenges. There are no private schools in many rural counties. Where there are private schools, such as one in a county in southwest Georgia, they offer little to ameliorate these challenges.

Many Georgians who make their home in southwest Georgia struggle with poverty. There are 13 mostly rural county school systems served by the Southwest Georgia Regional Education Service Agency (RESA).¹ At least 24% of children in all but one of these counties is poor, and in six of them, a third or more of children are poor.

Child Poverty in Southwest Georgia RESA

County	Children in Poverty
Baker County	24%
Calhoun County	34%
Decatur County	31%
Dougherty County	38%
Early County	39%
Grady County	25%
Lee County	15%
Miller County	37%
Mitchell County	40%
Seminole County	27%
Terrell County	47%
Thomas County	26%
Worth County	29%

Seven of these counties do not have a private school according to available data, and three have only one private school. An examination of one county in the Southwest Georgia RESA, which has one private school, reveals how SB 233 will not serve students effectively.

This county has a population of less than 25,000, which has declined by more than seven percent since 2010. In addition to a high child poverty rate, education levels among adults are comparatively low, a concerning indicator, as parent education is a key factor in children's academic success. About 18% of adults in the county have less than a high school diploma compared to 11% across the state, and about 12% have bachelor's degree or higher, far lower than the statewide average of 36%.² Students in the county school district reflect these difficulties. The majority are low-income, and their scores on the state's standardized tests are low, a sign of the challenges of poverty.

Students in the county school system would likely be eligible for a voucher under SB 233, but it is doubtful the county's one private school would be a stepping stone to academic success for them. The school serves "average to above average students" and limits which students are admitted. Its various costs push the private school out of reach for low-income families.

Selective Admissions. The private school has admission standards that include:

- A satisfactory score on a required entrance exam
- Good standing academically and behaviorally at the last school attended

In addition, students who are married or who are parents are not allowed to attend the school.

Cost: The cost of attending this private school exceeds the voucher amount of \$6,500.

Tuition & Fees 1st-5th Grade

Tuition 1st-5th Grades	\$ 6,520
Family registration fee	\$ 300
Building fee per family	\$ 400
Technology fee	\$ 150
Gift card program	\$ 250
Annual <u>fund raising</u> raffle	\$ 350
Total	\$ 7,970

Tuition & Fees 6th-12th Grade

Tuition 6th-12th Grades	\$ 6,795
Family registration fee	\$ 300
Building fee per family	\$ 400
Technology fee	\$ 150
Gift card program	\$ 250
Annual <u>fund raising</u> raffle	\$ 350
Total	\$ 8,245

The school offers a lunch program at a weekly cost of \$20 to \$22 depending on student grade level. Parents are also required to participate in school-related service events each year and can incur a fine for failing to do so. The school does not provide transportation.

Even with a \$6,500 voucher, this private school is out of reach for many families in the county. Nearly 40% of families in this county earned less than \$35,000 in 2021.

- Less than \$10,000: 11.2%
- \$10,000- \$14,999: 5.7%
- \$15,000-\$24,999: 9.9%
- \$25,000-\$34,999: 12.9%³

At these income levels, families strain to cover basic necessities. Covering the full cost of attending this private school even with a \$6,500 voucher would surpass their resources.

Instead of directing state funds to SB 233's voucher program, lawmakers can better serve students in this county and public schools across southwest Georgia facing similar difficulties by investing in literacy instruction, including literacy specialists and coaches, evidence-based professional development in literacy for teachers, and high-quality literacy curriculum materials. Students would also benefit greatly from access to high-speed internet, more school counselors and social workers, smaller class sizes in grades K-2, and high-quality tutoring and summer enrichment programs. Investments such as these lift all students, not a selected few, and would help build a workforce that can generate and attract business investments that serve the region.

¹ There are also two city school districts in Southwest Georgia RESA: Pelham City Schools and Thomasville City Schools

² U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates.

³ U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates.