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Abbott touts school choice in Houston visit as protesters slam vouchers, HISD takeover

Houston ISD community members call Gov. Abbott a 'traitor'



Sam González Kelly

Updated: May 2, 2023 10:47 p.m.





Texas Gov. Greg Abbott addresses attendees of the Parent Empowerment Night at Reflections of Christ's Kingdom on Tuesday, May 2, 2023 in Houston.

Elizabeth Conley/Staff photographer

Gov. Greg Abbott's "parent empowerment tour" stopped Tuesday evening at a southeast Houston church, where the governor pushed his plan for school vouchers as a group of protesters demonstrated outside.

The roughly two dozen protesters dubbed Abbott's circuit of Texas schools and churches the "Takeover Tour," positioning the state takeover of HISD as part of a broader effort by Texas Republicans to weaken local, democratically elected government. Parents, teachers, students and advocates stood outside Reflections of Christ's Kingdom Church to denounce school vouchers, STAAR testing and charter schools ahead of Abbott's speech inside.



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"The value of public education cannot be undermined. Public education has given me everything I've ever known, everything that I know now," said Amarian Porterie, a senior at Austin High School in the East End.

"Gov. Abbott cannot do this to us, he cannot defund us the way he is... he can't take away these rights that he's taken away," Porterie said.

Abbott, for his part, did not mention the state takeover during his remarks later Tuesday evening in the church auditorium, but did accept that school

later Tuesday evening in the church auditorium, but did assert that school vouchers, in which public funds are used to subsidize tuition payments for private education, were a matter of parents' rights. He was joined in front of a diverse crowd of over 100 people by former boxer George Foreman and Jim "Mattress Mack" McIngvale, among others.



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Demonstrators protest, with one holding a sign with the names of the victims of the recent mass shooting in San Jacinto County, outside "parent empowerment night" attended by Gov. Greg Abbott at The Reflection of Christ's Kingdom Church on Tuesday, May 2, 2023 in Houston.

Brett Coomer/Staff photographer

The governor said that vouchers would allow parents, and especially those with low incomes, to remove students from public schools where they might be bullied or exposed to leftist agendas by allowing them to access up to \$8,000 in public funds for enrollment in a private school or homeschool materials. The \$8,000 would not be enough to cover tuition at most private schools.

Opponents of school vouchers say they weaken public schools by removing money from campuses that see a drop in attendance, while Abbott said that it was not an "either-or" situation.

"What you should be given is a choice to find a school that's right for your child, and that's why I'm here," Abbott said.

child, and that's why I am here," Abbott said.

Abbott's remarks were interrupted by a handful of protesters who made their way inside the auditorium, shouting "Abbott's got to go" and calling him a "traitor" before they were forcibly removed by security. The governor was also confronted as he posed for photos after the rally by family members of slain Santa Fe High School students, who demanded to know why he hadn't taken action on gun violence in schools nearly five years after 10 people were shot to death at the school.

Abbott accused the first group of protesters of being paid by lobbyists. His press office could not be reached for comment Tuesday night regarding the second confrontation.



— A protester shouts while Texas Gov. Greg Abbott addresses attendees of the Parent Empowerment Night at Reflections of Christ's Kingdom on Tuesday,

May 2, 2023 in Houston.

Elizabeth Conley/Staff photographer





— Protestors are removed by security while Texas Gov. Greg Abbott addresses attendees of the Parent Empowerment Night at Reflections of Christ's Kingdom on Tuesday, May 2, 2023 in Houston. Elizabeth Conley/Staff photographer

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Ruth Kravetz, co-founder of Community Voices for Education, which was among the organizers of Tuesday's protest, said they "invite the governor to have a face-to-face meeting with the families he slandered" when he said they were "supported by lobbyists."

"We stand united against the governor's illegitimate attempts to dismantle public education and our democracy," Kravetz said.

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Abbott's attempts to pass school vouchers came to a standstill last month after the Texas House nixed vouchers from their school budget while the Texas Senate passed its own voucher plan. He and other Texas Republicans have less than a month to convince about two dozen more state representatives to vote in favor of vouchers, though Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick has suggested he could call a special session this summer to get vouchers passed if the House does not act by the time the legislative session ends at the end of May.

Abbott urged his supporters at R.O.C.K. Church to call their state representatives and pressure them to pass the "school choice" plan.

"If you do that, it may be you who is responsible for bringing school choice to the great state of Texas," Abbott said.

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≡ BY JEN RICE, ALEXANDRA KANIK

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