

**THE CHOICE IS CLEAR:**

# **Expanded School Choice Options Generate Positive Outcomes for Students and Schools**



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# Key Findings

1

THE CONCEPT OF **SCHOOL CHOICE HAS EXISTED** IN THE UNITED STATES SINCE 1869.

2

THERE ARE SEVERAL SCHOOL CHOICE OPTIONS FOR STATES TO CHOOSE FROM, INCLUDING **CHARTER SCHOOLS, EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNTS, AND SCHOOL VOUCHERS.**

3

**SCHOOL CHOICE LEADS TO POSITIVE OUTCOMES** IN TEST SCORES, EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, AND PARENTAL SATISFACTION.

4

**FLORIDA IS A NATIONAL LEADER ON SCHOOL CHOICE.** SINCE IMPLEMENTING EXPANSIVE SCHOOL CHOICE PROGRAMS, TEST SCORES FOR THE STATE'S FOURTH GRADERS HAVE SKYROCKETED.

## THE BOTTOM LINE:

STATES SHOULD IMPLEMENT—OR WORK TOWARD IMPLEMENTING—UNIVERSAL SCHOOL CHOICE WHERE EVERY PARENT HAS ACCESS TO THE SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN NEED TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS.

## Overview

At the heart of American culture and pride is a desire to make choices for ourselves and our families without the overbearing input and influence of the government. Despite the agenda pushed by leftist politicians and left-leaning organizations, individual choice in education was once commonplace for families. In fact, one of the first true school choice programs was enacted in 1869 and largely mirrors the sentiments of school choice programs today.<sup>1</sup>

However, parental choice in education has slowly waned as the country transitioned toward a more streamlined public school model. Teachers' unions have relentlessly tried to maintain this model—which, unfortunately, is rapidly declining in quality.<sup>2</sup> Reading and math scores among middle schoolers have fallen to their lowest levels in decades.<sup>3</sup> Polling shows that most adults believe that public education is trending in the wrong direction, and that teachers are bringing their personal political or social viewpoints into the classroom.<sup>4</sup>



**ONE OF THE FIRST TRUE SCHOOL CHOICE PROGRAMS WAS ENACTED IN 1869.**

As the state of K-12 education continues to deteriorate, parents need more options at their disposal, not fewer. Studies have shown that expanded access to school choice programs leads to higher test scores, parental satisfaction, and student safety.<sup>5</sup> States should expand school choice options to provide parents with the tools necessary to choose an educational pathway that best meets the needs of their children.

## Common school choice options

Today, there are 75 school choice programs across the country—each one providing students with the resources needed to best fit their unique needs.<sup>6</sup> School choice programs exist from coast to coast, as 33 states and Washington, D.C. have at least one program on the books.<sup>7</sup> While the pathways available to students are unique to each individual state, there are several common school choice programs. These programs include options related to public schools, private schools, and homeschooling—but all prioritize tailoring education to meet the individual needs of the student.



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# Public school options

## CHARTER SCHOOLS

Charter schools are public schools that are often exempt from many rules and regulations found in state law.<sup>8</sup> Hallmarks of the charter school model are accountability, autonomy, and flexibility. Some charter schools provide specialized curricula and others exist to benefit underserved communities that have been left behind through traditional public schooling.<sup>9</sup> There are no fees or tuition requirements for students.<sup>10</sup> If a charter school receives more applications than they have available seats, enrollment is typically based on a lottery system.



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## MAGNET SCHOOLS

Magnet schools operate similarly to charter schools—they are publicly funded but allow more autonomy and creativity in developing curricula as they are exempt from many state rules and regulations.<sup>11</sup> Magnet schools are often designed to attract students that have common interests, skillsets, and abilities.<sup>12</sup> Some magnet schools focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, while others may focus on visual and performing arts. **Like charter schools, magnet schools are publicly funded, so students do not pay tuition to attend.** But since magnet schools are more targeted in curricula, students must apply and be accepted before enrolling.<sup>13</sup>

## INTER- AND INTRA-DISTRICT CHOICE

Unlike charter, magnet, and private options, inter-district and intra-district school choice focuses on removing government-imposed barriers to entry for traditional public schools—in most cases, ZIP Code requirements or arbitrary school zones.

Intra-district choice allows families to choose between the public schools that are assigned to that family's district.<sup>14</sup> By utilizing intra-district choice, students and families would be able to choose from any of the schools within their district.

Inter-district choice broadens the school range and affords families the opportunity to choose from any public school in their state or defined region.<sup>15</sup> For example, if a student lives in a very rural community that has been traditionally underserved, this option would allow that student to attend any school within a designated region.

## Private options

### EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNTS (ESAS)

ESAs in K-12 education provide parents with a publicly funded savings account that can be used for multiple educational purposes, with some restrictions.<sup>16</sup> Parents can use these funds to pay for tuition, online educational programs, textbooks, tutoring, resources for students with special needs, and in some instances can save these funds for college.<sup>17</sup>

### SCHOOL VOUCHERS

Voucher programs provide families with the opportunity to select a private school for their child using public funding that has already been set aside for that child's education by the school district.<sup>18</sup> Typically, these programs operate by providing families with a voucher that can be used to pay for all, or some, of their child's private school tuition—including both religious and non-religious institutions.<sup>19</sup>



**VOUCHER PROGRAMS PROVIDE FAMILIES WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO SELECT A PRIVATE SCHOOL FOR THEIR CHILD USING PUBLIC FUNDING.**

### TAX-CREDIT SCHOLARSHIPS

Tax-credit scholarship programs operate by incentivizing individuals and businesses to donate to non-profit organizations that provide private school scholarships.<sup>20</sup> By donating, individuals and businesses are eligible to receive full or partial tax credits.<sup>21</sup> In some states, non-profits that provide scholarships also provide funds to public schools for innovation or transportation assistance to students choosing a public school.<sup>22</sup>

### TAX-CREDIT EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNTS

Tax-credit ESAs operate similarly to traditional ESAs with one key caveat—rather than the government providing funding, the funding instead comes from non-profit organizations that manage parent-directed ESAs.<sup>23</sup> Similarly to tax-credit scholarships, individuals are eligible for full or partial tax credits when they donate to these non-profits.<sup>24</sup>

Families can use these funds for a host of educational purposes, such as tuition and fees, private tutoring, community college costs, online learning programs, higher education expenses, and more.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the unused funds typically rollover to the next year for future educational expenses.<sup>26</sup>

### INDIVIDUAL TAX CREDITS AND DEDUCTIONS

Individual tax credits and deductions provide parents with state income tax relief for approved educational purchases.<sup>27</sup> These expenses can include private school tuition, supplies, books, tutors, computers, and transportation.<sup>28</sup>

# School choice programs yield positive results

The goal of school choice programs is to improve outcomes for all involved—including students, parents, public schools, and private schools. School choice programs do not exist to simply transfer money or students from one educational institution to another, but to generate better results.

By 2024, nearly 200 studies had been conducted on the effectiveness of school choice programs.<sup>29</sup> These studies focus on both private and public schools and how school choice programs have impacted educational outcomes in both environments.

## Educational attainment

Research shows that most students participating in a school choice program see positive effects on their test scores—with some improving immediately and others gradually.<sup>30</sup> Test scores for students participating in voucher programs are linked to the number of years the student participates. Eventually, these students outperform their public school peers after four years of voucher participation.<sup>31</sup> Since 2017, several states with robust school choice options have either seen 4th grade test scores skyrocket or remain near the top of nationwide rankings.<sup>32-37</sup>

### STATES WITH EXPANDED SCHOOL CHOICE OPTIONS SEE RISING TEST SCORES

*Nationwide rankings for 4th grade math test scores*

STATE	2017	2019	2022
FLORIDA	7th	4th	4th
INDIANA	6th	7th	11th
NEW HAMPSHIRE	9th	8th	9th
WISCONSIN	24th	17th	5th

*Nationwide rankings for 4th grade reading test scores*

STATE	2017	2019	2022
FLORIDA	5th	6th	3rd
IOWA	27th	23rd	15th
OHIO	10th	15th	13th
NEW HAMPSHIRE	3rd	8th	6th
WISCONSIN	33rd	26th	18th

*Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress*

Educational attainment is not limited to a student's test scores—it also includes how likely that student is to graduate, enroll in college, and stay in college. Studies show that school choice programs yield positive results in this regard, with many students experiencing higher educational outcomes after participation.<sup>38</sup> **In Florida, participants in the low-income tax-credit scholarship program were much more likely to attend college than their peers that did not participate—a 12 percent increase among elementary and middle school students and a 19 percent increase for high school students.**<sup>39</sup>

## Parental satisfaction

Increased outcomes in educational attainment are invaluable, but parent satisfaction is equally important when considering the success of school choice programs. Many school choice programs specifically cater to low- and middle-class families and students that have special needs.<sup>40</sup>

Ninety-four percent of studies show that parents are more satisfied with their student's educational circumstances after entering a school choice program than before.<sup>41</sup> Parents also reported an increased level of engagement in their children's education after participating in a voucher or scholarship program.<sup>42</sup> In Indiana—the single largest voucher program nationwide—parents reported that they chose to participate for academic and safety reasons, as well as improving their children's moral instruction.<sup>43</sup> In Florida, roughly 95 percent of parents utilizing the state's low-income tax-credit scholarship program—the largest in the nation—reported their children now try harder, stay out of trouble more often, have increased levels of attention, and are safer at their new schools.<sup>44</sup>



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## Public school test scores improved

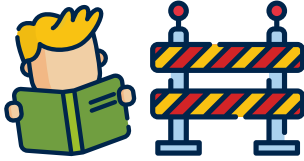
Opponents of school choice often claim that expanding educational choice for students and families is to the detriment of local and statewide public schools—but the data shows otherwise.

Ninety percent of studies show that public schools that face greater levels of competition tend to improve as a result.<sup>45</sup> When there are more private school choice programs available, nearby public schools are incentivized to improve.<sup>46</sup> In areas with more private schools and increased access to school choice programs, public schools generally improve their reading, English, and math proficiency scores.<sup>47</sup>

The Florida Tax Credit (FTC) Scholarship Program—one of the longest running and largest in the nation—produced incredible results for the students remaining in public schools. Math and reading scores improved, absenteeism was reduced, and the number of school suspensions also decreased.<sup>48</sup>

# Barriers to school choice are harming students and holding states back

Despite the success of states that have adopted school choice programs, there are still barriers preventing students from getting an education that best fits their needs. Unfortunately, the main culprit holding states and students back are teachers' unions.



**THERE ARE STILL BARRIERS PREVENTING STUDENTS FROM GETTING AN EDUCATION THAT BEST FITS THEIR NEEDS.**

Teachers' unions exist to promote the interests of public school teachers—even if those interests are fundamentally opposed to what is in the best interest of the students.<sup>49</sup> These unions, and other advocacy groups, claim that expansive school choice options are harmful to public schools because it means fewer taxpayer dollars coming through the door.<sup>50</sup>

However, taxpayer dollars allocated for education are not meant to serve as a lifeline for faltering institutions—they are designated for educating the children of that state. Rather than welcoming school choice and allowing public schools to retain students on merit alone, teachers' unions seek to block all other avenues—even though studies show that school choice programs are a net-positive for public schools.<sup>51-52</sup>

Teachers' unions have worked to stymie school choice legislation in many states. The National Education Association (NEA) is one of the largest teachers' unions nationwide, representing nearly three million teachers in multiple states.<sup>53</sup> **NEA spent roughly \$519 million from September 2022 through August 2023—spending \$10 million more on politics and lobbying than the amount of funding than they spent on member representation.**<sup>54</sup> In fact, spending on member representation accounted for less than eight percent of NEA's total spending during this time.<sup>55</sup> Rather than funding activities that promote the interests of millions of teachers, NEA chose to promote lobbying efforts that strip students and families of personal choice instead.

In essentially every aspect of life, Americans are afforded the freedom to make choices that reflect the best outcomes for themselves and their families. Yet teachers' unions have successfully prevented families from enjoying the same level of choice in the education of their children. These barriers to school choice—promoted by teachers' unions across the country—harm students, hold states back, and hinder the success of the teachers they claim to represent.

## School choice has been successful in Florida

Florida has been a trailblazer for school choice for more than two decades. Since the creation of the FTC program in 2001—one of the first programs nationwide—the state has been at the forefront of providing students with school choice options that assist families in tailoring their child's education to meet their specific needs.<sup>56</sup> But Florida did not stop there.



In 2014, the state launched the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Students with Unique Abilities to assist families of students with special needs.<sup>57</sup> This is an ESA funded by the state, administered by an approved scholarship funding organization, and created to assist students with individualized education plans or that have been diagnosed with autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, or other similar diagnoses.<sup>58</sup>

In 2018, Florida launched the Hope Scholarship Program—a first-of-its-kind scholarship awarded to students that are or have been victims of bullying within their school.<sup>59</sup> This program provides private school scholarships to these students or allows them to transfer to another public school district.<sup>60</sup> In 2019, Florida created the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Education Options Program (FES-EO)—an ESA that was initially created to provide private school choice for low-income students statewide.<sup>61</sup> In 2023, this became the most expansive ESA program nationwide by expanding eligibility to all Florida residents that are eligible to enroll in K-12 public schools statewide.<sup>62</sup>



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The Sunshine State is a national model on school choice for other states to follow. The FES-EO and FTC programs are available to all students statewide—while prioritizing low-income families—and the Hope Scholarship Program is available to nearly three million students across the state.<sup>63-65</sup> Even better, FES-EO is available to nearly 371,000 families of students with special needs.<sup>66</sup>

All told, participation across Florida’s host of school choice programs is roughly 353,000 students—or 10 percent of all students in the state.<sup>67-70</sup> However, participation alone does not tell the full story. Since the adoption of school choice in 2001, Florida has seen significant improvements in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test scores.

Prior to implementing school choice, Florida was below the national average in both reading and mathematics scores among fourth grade students.<sup>71</sup> But once school choice was adopted, NAEP scores for fourth grade students began to immediately improve.<sup>72</sup> By 2022, Florida fourth graders boasted some of the highest NAEP scores nationwide—having the fourth-highest mathematics scores and third-highest reading scores.<sup>73-74</sup>



**BY 2022, FLORIDA FOURTH GRADERS BOASTED SOME OF THE HIGHEST NAEP SCORES NATIONWIDE.**

Florida has several school choice options for students. The state has seen participation steadily increase, and student performance skyrocket. [For states seeking to implement school choice programs, Florida should serve as the model to follow.](#)

**THE BOTTOM LINE: States should implement—or work toward implementing—universal school choice where every parent has access to the support their student needs to achieve success.**

School choice programs lead to higher test scores, increased levels of educational attainment, and more satisfied parents. States like Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Ohio, New Hampshire, North Carolina, West Virginia, and Wisconsin have already moved on providing school choice options, giving other states a path to follow.<sup>75</sup>

Education is not a one-size-fits-all approach—lawmakers have several options at their disposal. Incremental steps can be taken to provide families with more options for their children’s educational futures. More states should expand school choice to empower parents and fit students’ unique needs.



**School choice programs lead to higher test scores, increased levels of educational attainment, and more satisfied parents.**



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