

POLICY BRIEF

Overview of public school choice programs

How national and state-level public school choice improves learning opportunities for families and children

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October 2017

Key Findings

- 1. School choice programs let parents, rather than government officials, decide which learning options are best for their children.*
- 2. School choice is much more common today than in the past; in many states they are a routine part of the public education system.*
- 3. All states and the District of Columbia offer families some form of school choice.*
- 4. About one-fifth of students in the United States benefit from school choice.*
- 5. In Washington state, officials ban many popular forms of school choice, compared to other states.*
- 6. The primary obstacles to education reform are public-sector unions that profit from a closed, monopoly-type system.*
- 7. School choice is not a threat to families that are happy with their local public school.*
- 8. However, for families trapped in failing public schools, educational choice offers a way out.*



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Introduction

This paper provides an overview of how elementary, middle and high school students benefit from school choice in the United States and in Washington state.

School choice programs are much more common today than in the past, and in many states these programs are seen as a routine part of the public education system. A school choice program is one in which parents and families, rather than government officials, decide which educational options are best for their children.

Allowing parents to choose a school that meets their child's educational needs is a powerful and popular idea, and state officials have created a robust variety of school choice programs across the country. Many families find choice to be a better way to access publically-funded education than being arbitrarily assigned to a school based on zip code.

Forms of school choice

All states and the District of Columbia offer families some form of school choice. Officials in some states, notably Florida and Arizona, allow a wide range of educational options, with a large percentage of resident families taking advantage of these programs.

Officials in other states, however, such as Washington state, allow families to have much less educational choice.¹

In the 2017-18 school year, 51 million public school students are enrolled in 98,200 public schools nationwide.² In addition, some 5.2 million students attend 33,619 private schools, and 1.8 million students are homeschooled. In 2016-17, Washington state had 1.1 million students attending about 2,200 public schools (the latest figures available).³ Of these, 2,500 students attend 10 charter schools.⁴

Altogether, about one-fifth of students in the United States benefit from school choice.

Following is a description of the types of public school choice options and the number of students who benefit from them.

School choice options nationally and in Washington state

Opportunity Scholarships in Washington, D.C. Families living in the nation's capitol can receive up to \$7,500 a year in federal money to attend a private school. The program is popular with families that otherwise would be assigned to failing inner city schools based on their zip code.

- About 2,000 District of Columbia students, mostly from low-income minority families, attend private schools under the Opportunity Scholarship program.⁵

1 Washington state does, however, offer students a wide variety of high quality online learning programs. See "Keeping Pace with K-12 Digital Learning, An Annual Review of Policy and Practice," 12th edition, Evergreen Education Group, 2015, at http://static1.squarespace.com/static/59381b9a17bffc68bf625df4/59382263a6525a8458e86b64/5938230da6525a8458e888d0/1496851213867/Evergreen_KeepingPace_2015.pdf?format=original.

2 "Fast Facts, Back to School Statistics, Fall 2017," National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education at <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>.

3 "October 1, 2016 State Level Enrollment," Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Washington State, at <http://www.k12.wa.us/DataAdmin/enrollment.aspx>.

4 "Washington's public charter school students head back to school," press release, Washington State Charter School Association, August 30, 2017.

5 "District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program, Programs," U.S. Department of Education at <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/dcchoice/index.html>.

Private education. Private education is a form of school choice because parents, not government officials, independently decide what school a child will attend. Ironically, many government workers (including public school district employees) use their tax-funded salary as a “voucher” to pay for private education for their own children.

- Nationally, 5.2 million children attend 33,619 private schools.⁶
- In Washington state, 101,450 students attend 757 private schools.⁷

Magnet schools. Magnet public schools are a form of school choice because parents choose the school, and students must apply and be accepted to attend.⁸ Magnet schools often focus on STEM education, vocational skills and the arts.

- Nationally, 2.6 million students attend 3,285 magnet schools in 33 states.⁹
- In Washington state, officials do not allow magnet schools. Officials in some districts allow parents to apply to select public schools on a limited basis. Examples include Aviation High School in Seattle and Delta High School in Pasco.

Charter schools. Charter schools are public schools. They are a form of school choice because parents choose the school. As public schools, charters must meet state academic standards and accept all applicants. Due to their popularity, most charter schools are over-subscribed and hold lotteries for each entering class. As a result, most charter schools maintain lists of families waiting to get in.

6 “Fast Facts, Educational Institutions,” National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education at <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=84>.

7 “Private School Review, Washington Private Schools,” www.privateschoolreview.com/washington.

8 “Selected Statistics From the Public Elementary and Secondary Education Universe: School Year 2014-15,” National Center of Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, September 2016, Table 3, page 9, at <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016076.pdf>.

9 Number and enrollment of public elementary and secondary schools, by school level, type, and charter and magnet status: Selected years, 1990-91 through 2014-15, Table 216.20,” National Center of Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2016, at https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_216.20.asp.

- Nationally, 3.1 million students attend 6,900 charter public schools in 43 states.
- About one million students are on charter school waiting lists.¹⁰
- In Washington state, 2,500 students attend 10 charter public schools.¹¹ Two more charter schools are scheduled to open in Fall 2018.¹² Most schools are so popular they are over-subscribed and maintain waiting lists.

Online education. Online learning is a form of school choice because the parents choose the online educational program for their children and the credits earned meet state graduation requirements.

- Nationally, 934,968 full-time students attend online public schools in 24 states.¹³ In addition, some 2.2 million students take about 4.7 million individual supplemental public school courses online.¹⁴
- Students in most states can use tax-funded vouchers to attend private online schools.¹⁵
- In Washington state, 31,674 students participate in 81 public school district online programs. In addition, students can use

10 Estimated Charter Public School Enrollment, 2016-17,” National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, at http://www.publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/EER_Report_V5.pdf.

11 “Washington’s public charter school students head back to school,” press release, Washington State Charter School Association, August 30, 2017, and “Willow public school opening Fall 2018,” public notice, Washington State Charter School Association, accessed October 11, 2017.

12 “Impact Public Schools to launch Tukwila’s first charter public school,” press release, Washington State Charter School Association, June 29, 2017.

13 “Keeping pace with K-12 Online Learning,” Evergreen Education Group, 2016, Table I, page 16, at https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59381b9a17bffc68bf625df4/t/593efc779f745684e6ccf4d8/1497300100709/EEG_KP2016-web.pdf.

14 “Keeping Pace with K-12 Digital Learning, An Annual Review of Policy and Practice,” 2015, 12th edition, Evergreen Education Group, page 16, at http://static1.squarespace.com/static/59381b9a17bffc68bf625df4/59382263a6525a8458e86b64/5938230da6525a8458e888d0/1496851213867/Evergreen_KeepingPace_2015.pdf?format=original.

15 An example is Connections Academy, which serves public school students in most states, see <https://www.connectionsacademy.com/>.

tax-funded vouchers to attend one of 18 private online schools and take private certified online courses.¹⁶

Homeschooling. Homeschooling is a form of school choice because parents choose the educational program and homeschooled children earn state-approved credits for graduation. In the 1970s union activists tried to make homeschooling illegal, but the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that parents have a constitutional right to guide the education of their children.¹⁷ Today, homeschoolers often outperform traditional school students on standardized tests.

- Nationally, about 1.8 million children receive homeschooling in 50 states.¹⁸
- In Washington state, about 21,000 students are homeschooled.¹⁹

Education Savings Accounts (ESAs). ESAs are a form of school choice because they provide families with public funds to pay for private school, online learning, private tutoring, community college, and other learning services chosen by the parents.

- Nationally, 11,024 students received Education Savings Accounts in five states.²⁰
- In Washington state, officials do not permit parents to have access to Education Savings Accounts.

Education vouchers. Education vouchers are a form of school choice because they allow families to receive the public funding to which their children are entitled to pay for education. They are

16 “Update: Online Learning, Report to the Legislature,” Kathe Taylor, Ph.D., Assistant Superintendent of Learning and Teaching, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Washington State, February 2017, pages 4 and 10, at <http://k12.wa.us/LegisGov/2017documents/2017-2-OnlineLearningUPDATE.pdf>.

17 “Wisconsin v. Yoder,” United States Supreme Court, 406 U.S. 205, 1972.

18 “Table 206.10, 2016 Digest of Education Statistics,” National Center for Education Statistics, at https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_206.10.asp?current=yes.

19 “Home-Based Instruction Annual Report, 2016-17,” Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Washington State, at <http://www.k12.wa.us/PrivateEd/HomeBasedEd/AnnualReports.aspx>.

20 “The ABC’s of School Choice, 2017 edition,” *EDChoice*, at <https://www.edchoice.org/research/the-abcs-of-school-choice/>. The five states are Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, Tennessee, and North Carolina.

like Pell Grants, the GI Bill, disability payments, Social Security benefits, and other government transfer payments that allow the recipient to direct how the public funds are spent.

- Nationally, 178,419 students in 15 states and the District of Columbia receive education vouchers.²¹
- In Washington state, officials do not permit parents to have access to education vouchers.

Tax credit scholarships. Tax credit scholarships are a form of school choice because they allow citizens to make tax-free donations to pay for the education of children. The donations can be used to pay tuition at a private school, afterschool tutoring, online learning, or other educational services.

- Nationally, 256,784 students in 17 states receive tax credit scholarships.²²
- In Washington state, officials do not permit parents to have access to tax credit scholarships.

Individual Tax Credits. Individual tax credits, or deductions, are a form of school choice because they allow families to receive a reduction in their state income tax to help pay the educational expenses of their children, including text books, supplies, computers, after school tutoring, transportation, or tuition at a private school.

- Nationally, 881,720 families receive individual tax credits, or a deduction, for education expenses in eight states.²³

21 “Table 4.7, States with voucher programs, by state: 2017, State Education Reforms,” National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, at https://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab4_7.asp, and “The ABC’s of School Choice, 2017 edition,” *EDChoice*, at <https://www.edchoice.org/research/the-abcs-of-school-choice/>.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid. The eight states are Alabama, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Minnesota, South Carolina, and Wisconsin.

- In Washington state, officials do not allow families to receive a tax credit or deduction for the educational expenses of their children.²⁴

The benefits of school choice to children and families

School choice helps individual families find a public or private school that best fits their needs. At the same time, choice programs create powerful incentives for traditional school systems to improve. School choice gives central district administrators a reason to reform their schools, so they do not lose families to the available alternatives. An academic review of 33 empirical education studies found that 32 of them concluded school choice policies have a beneficial effect on traditional schools.²⁵

The highest-quality research shows students individually gain from having school choice, and that traditional school systems respond to the near presence of school choice by improving their services for children attending traditional schools.²⁶

Two recent surveys show strong public support for providing state aid directly to families to help them educate their children.²⁷ The surveys show that young people in particular support allowing families to use tax-funded vouchers to pay tuition at private schools. The surveys found that private schools generally enjoy a higher level of public trust than traditional public schools.

24 Washington state does not have an income tax. An educational tax credit or deduction in Washington, if it existed, would allow families a reduction in their state property, sales or other tax.

25 “A Win-Win Solution; The Empirical Evidence on School Choice,” by Greg Forster, EDChoice, May 2016, at <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2016-5-Win-Win-Solution-WEB.pdf>.

26 “Choosing to Learn,” by Joseph Bast, Jason Bedrick, Lindsey Burke, Andrew J. Coulson, Robert C. Enlow, Kara Kerwin, and Herbert J. Walberg, *CATO Institute Commentary*, March 12, 2014, at <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/choosing-learn>.

27 “Re: School Choice Survey Research Results,” by Beck Research, January 10, 2017, at <http://www.federationforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/AFC-Beck-National-Survey-Results-1-10-17.pdf>.

“Survey: Millennials hold complex views on education,” by Greg Toppo, *USA Today*, September 11, 2017 at https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2017/09/11/survey-millennials-hold-complex-views-education/655696001/?mc_cid=d2d332c6de&mc_eid=f124bd9549.

The primary obstacles to school choice

The primary obstacles to giving parents access to school choice are public-sector labor unions that profit from a closed, monopoly-type educational system. In non-right-to-work states, like Washington state, membership in the union is mandatory for most school district employees, and any teacher who does not make payments to the union (generally about \$1,000 a year) is fired.

For that reason union executives see allowing parents to have school choice as a threat, because families that use choice to “escape” undermine the union’s access to money and power within a closed public education system. In Washington, for example, union executives have worked for years, so far without success, to close every charter school in the state.

Also, families and the broader public have been frustrated by the inability of state and federal policymakers to improve the quality of the public schools. Top-down, centralized efforts at education reform have been shown not to work.

This finding is drawn from experience. Over the last 25 years, federal and state elected officials have promoted and later abandoned policies such as mandatory school busing, Goals 2000, No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, Standards-Based Learning, and the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL).

In a repeated pattern, officials announce centrally-driven reform initiatives with great fanfare, direct billions of dollars of public money to each effort, then quietly abandon them in following years. Decades of political and bureaucratic failure have led families that are arbitrarily assigned to failing schools to seek alternatives.

Conclusion

Family choice in education is far more common today as it was in the past. In many states, forms of school choice that were once controversial, such as charter schools, homeschooling, Education Savings Accounts, tax credit scholarships and school vouchers, are now broadly popular and widely accepted by elected officials of both parties.

In Washington state, charter schools were approved by popular referendum and later confirmed through a bi-partisan vote in the legislature. In adopting other forms of educational choice, however, Washington lags behind advances made in other states.

For many Americans today, school choice programs are a positive and normal part of everyday life. Once available, families who are underserved by poor-performing schools review their options and make alternative choices for their children. For these families, deciding what school to attend is a routine part of raising children.

The experience of other states shows that school choice is not a threat to families that are happy with their local public school. These families are still be able to send their children to the local public school if they want to. Education spending increases every year, and no school is deprived of per-student funding due to the choices of parents.

But for families that find themselves trapped in failing public schools, educational choice offers a way out. They are not trying to hold anyone back, they just want their child to have an equal chance at success.

Published by Washington Policy Center

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