



POLICY FOCUS

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School Choice in the States

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HIGHLIGHT

Huge historical legislative victories have occurred over the past four years, advancing school choice in states nationwide. In some states, the wins have entailed the creation of new school choice programs, while in other states, it has involved expanding existing programs to reach more students. Most noteworthy has been the enactment of universal or near-universal school choice in 12 states since 2021.

INTRODUCTION

The public education monopoly isn't working, and it is failing to fulfill its function to a greater degree than in years and decades past. There is a better way: education freedom, which allows parents to choose the school or other learning avenue that best fits their unique child.

A few years ago, widespread school choice was nearly unimaginable, but historical education freedom has occurred:

- Fewer than **500,000** public education students had access to school choice as

of 2020 unless their parents could afford private school tuition or were able to homeschool.

- Now, roughly **18.9 million** students have access to funding so their parents can select the learning avenue that will best serve their unique child.
- **Twelve states**—Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Utah, and West Virginia—have enacted universal or near-universal school choice.

Laws supporting access to private school choice come in various forms, including **private school scholarships**, **education savings accounts**, and **tax-credit scholarships**.

Public school choice avenues that allow students to enroll in a public school other than their residentially-assigned district school include intra-district (within the district) open enrollment, inter-district (outside the district) open enrollment, **magnet schools**, and **charter schools**.

All parents should be empowered to select the school or alternative learning avenue for their unique child. This is known as education freedom.

Landmark education freedom wins occurred during the 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024 state legislative sessions. Parental demand for school choice is strong, and **more school choice legislative victories** at the state level are expected in the 2025 legislative sessions and beyond.

K-12 PUBLIC EDUCATION

With **52 million** public school students and **6.77 million employees**, K-12 public

education in the United States is the **largest monopoly in the world**—with the exception of state-owned monopolies in China.

Despite spending **nearly \$1 trillion** annually—averaging **almost \$19,000** per student per year—public education is failing to effectively educate the majority of students. On average, the spending exceeds \$450,000 per classroom of 24 students per year.

On the world stage, students in the United States are not competitive with their international peers, with 15-year-old students placing **9th in reading**, **16th in science**, and **34th in math**. In the United States, **77 percent** of K-12 public school students exit their 13 years of schooling, failing to achieve proficiency averaged across academic subjects.

The public is not only disappointed by the public schools' astronomical spending and lack of return on investment; it is also **concerned** about the lack of time spent on core academic learning and how a far-left progressive political agenda infiltrates school instruction.

Education sets the trajectory of an individual's life. Children spend 16,000 hours during their most formative years at school. More specifically, one-third of children's lives Monday through Friday during the school year occur at school. That is 45-50 percent of their awake hours during the week.

Access to school choice is essential because traditional public education is failing the overwhelming majority of K-12 students. **More money and more personnel** have proven not to increase the quality of public education despite decades of government trying that same approach.

It is worth asking: In a nation of capitalists, **why is one of America's largest industries publicly controlled?**

The fastest and most effective way to reform K-12 education is to break down the public school monopoly by advancing widespread school choice. A free market within K-12 education will create much-needed incentives for improvement. The by-products of a free market are competition, accountability, spurred innovation, and lowered costs.

It is not just the students who exit the public school system who benefit from K-12 options. When school choice exists in a community, the competition incentivizes improvement and has academic benefits for students, including both those who exit and those who remain in public schools.

CONTROL BY TEACHERS UNIONS

Teachers unions receive hundreds of millions of dollars a year in the form of union members' dues collected from the paychecks of teachers. The teacher unions use a large portion of that money to influence politics by allocating money to political campaigns, which are almost exclusively those of the Democratic Party. For example, the second largest teachers union—the American Federation of Teachers, with **1.8 million members**—allocated **99.99 percent** of campaign contributions in the 2022 election cycle and **99.1 percent** in the 2024 election cycle to Democrats.

Democratic policymakers reward the teachers unions with political power. That includes maintaining the public school monopoly. This incentivizes Democratic

policymakers to block parents from having options outside of the public education system for their children because keeping families captive to public education maintains as many teachers as possible who pay member dues that serve their political careers and agendas.

The teachers unions leverage their power to get political demands met. Additionally, they use their power to influence teacher training and what schools teach in order to advance the agenda of the Democratic Party to a captive and impressionable audience, which they recognize will be the future electorate. As a result, public education holds a monopoly on the American mind. School choice is the best way to break that monopoly and allow parents—not teachers unions and the Democratic Party—to have authority over their children's education.

TYPES OF SCHOOL CHOICE

Types of private school choice programs include private school scholarships (historically called vouchers), education savings accounts (often referred to by the acronym ESAs), and tax-credit scholarships (whether for private school scholarships or education savings accounts). Private school scholarships provide parents with a portion of their children's education funding to use for private school tuition.

Education savings accounts are similar to private school scholarships but are more flexible because the funding can be applied to not only private school tuition but also a wide variety of educational expenses including curriculum, testing, tutoring, online courses, educational technology, and therapies for students with special needs.

Tax-credit scholarships allow businesses and individuals to receive a tax credit when donating to a nonprofit that grants students private school scholarships or education savings accounts.

In addition to enabling all students within a state to exit the public education system, policy leaders should also provide school choice within the public school system.

More specifically, school choice occurs within the public education system when families can select an alternative public school to the residentially-assigned district schools. Policies allowing students to enroll in another school within their same district when space allows are referred to as intra-district or within-district open enrollment. When students can select a district public school outside their assigned district as space allows, that is referred to as inter-district or cross-district open enrollment.

Other types of school choice within the public education system include magnet schools and charter schools. **Magnet schools** offer a particular specialized learning focus and associated activities. **Charter schools** are public schools that are able to operate with some flexibility from regulations yet receive stricter accountability for their performance than district public schools. These schools often have great demand far exceeding enrollment capacity; therefore, lotteries are frequently utilized to determine which students can enroll.

A GREAT PARENT AWAKENING

A great parent awakening occurred during the prolonged school closures when parents had a front-row seat in their children's classrooms through the remote Zoom sessions to see the lack of quality academic

learning occurring and the peddling of political indoctrination. Parents watched as the teachers unions held their children hostage from returning to in-person school in order to get **irrelevant demands** met.

Concerns regarding public education were ensured, and parents advocated for access to alternative options. By the middle of 2023, conservative policymakers in several states—such as **Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Utah, and West Virginia**—had responded by passing historical school choice legislation, empowering all, or nearly all, parents statewide with a portion of their children's education funding to select an education avenue for their child outside the government-run, teacher union-controlled public education system. Open enrollment expansion has also occurred, giving parents more options within the public school system.

Among the general public, there is strong support for school choice across the political aisle. For example, as of March 2024, **74 percent of Democrats and 73 percent of Republicans** supported education savings accounts.

HISTORIC EDUCATION FREEDOM IS HAPPENING

As of 2020, **less than one percent** of the **more than 52 million** K-12 public school students in the U.S. had access to a school choice program, and zero states had K-12 universal or near-universal school choice. Fewer than **500,000** students were eligible to exit the public education system unless their parents had thousands of dollars a year for tuition money or were able to homeschool.

Currently, approximately **18.9 million** students have access to a private school

choice program with funding so their parents can select the learning avenue that will best serve their unique child. That translates to **36.3 percent** of U.S. students!

Twelve states—Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Utah, and West Virginia—have enacted universal or near-universal school choice. That means that all, or nearly all, students statewide are eligible to exit the public education system with a portion of their taxpayer education funds to select an alternative school.

In states where the school choice provision is an education savings account—as opposed to a private school scholarship (voucher) or tax credit—the funds are flexible to cover educational expenses beyond private school tuition. This allows the funds to be used toward homeschool expenses such as curriculum, tutoring, online courses, testing, and educational technology. Additionally, education savings account funds typically allow allocation toward therapies for students with special needs.

Eight of those 12 states enacted universal education savings accounts—Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Louisiana, Utah, and West Virginia. Three of the 12 states enacted universal private school scholarships—Indiana, North Carolina, and Ohio. One of the 12 states—Oklahoma—enacted a universal private school tax-credit scholarship.

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Education savings accounts are the gold standard of school choice programs and are becoming the most common type of new education choice legislation proposed and enacted at the state level. In 2023, **79 percent of the 111** school choice bills introduced in states were education saving account bills. Within the public school system in 2024, **54 open enrollment bills** were proposed in 23 states, with **six states**—Arkansas, Idaho, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and West Virginia—passing them into law.

SCHOOL CHOICE CREATES ENORMOUS SAVINGS FOR A STATE

Private school choice programs do not bankrupt a state as opponents claim but, conversely, produce tremendous savings.

For example, Republican Governor Doug Ducey **signed** Arizona’s universal Empowerment Scholarship Account program (an education savings account) into law on July 7, 2022. Opponents, including Democrat Katie Hobbs, then-Secretary of the State and now the current Governor, **tried relentlessly** to block the expansion of school choice and, since the passage of the universal program, have sought to overturn the law. They attempt to scare people with **the notion** that the program “will likely bankrupt this state.” In reality, Arizona had a **\$2 billion surplus** in the state budget the year the program went into effect.

In Arizona, families who opt for an education savings account receive, on average, **\$7,000 instead of the \$15,000** public education spends per student each year.

In the Wall Street Journal in October 2024, Martin F. Lueken **reported** that “a recent EdChoice **analysis** of 48 school-choice programs across 26 states through 2022 estimates that school-choice programs generated cumulative net fiscal benefits for taxpayers worth between \$19.4 billion and \$45.6 billion.” Lueken explained that “for every dollar spent on these programs, taxpayers have saved between \$1.70 and \$2.64 – a significant return on investment.”

Despite claims from the opposition, school choice programs generate enormous savings to a state’s bottom line. As of 2022, only two states had recently enacted universal school choice. With ten additional states signing universal school choice into law during the 2023 and 2024 legislative sessions, school choice programs in other states expanding, and more on the way, the collective savings to these states will be astronomical in the coming years as more families learn of these education freedom programs and opt to participate.

LITMUS TEST FOR REPUBLICAN POLICYMAKERS

As the 2024 primary and general elections showed, Republican policymakers who are opposed to school choice are getting voted out of office and replaced by pro-school choice champions. This occurred to a significant degree in **Missouri, Tennessee, Texas, Idaho, and Kentucky**. Republicans who remain anti-school choice in other states are taking notice, especially those in states with a Republican trifecta.

At the time of passing universal school choice into law, each of the 12 states had a Republican trifecta, meaning the Governor was Republican, and both the state House and Senate had a Republican majority. The only exception was **North Carolina**, where the Democratic Governor Roy Cooper’s veto of the universal school choice bill was overridden by the Republican veto-proof majority in both the House and Senate.

Thirteen other states—Georgia, Idaho, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, and Wyoming—have Republican trifectas currently. Republican policymakers must get the job done of passing sweeping school choice in their state or risk losing their reelection bid.

GROWING THE SUPPLY

With the significant increase of school choice legislation enacted in states over the past few years and more on the horizon, it is essential that the supply of education providers grows to meet the increased market demand. There is a timely opportunity for education entrepreneurs to create new schools, new school models, and a host of education services. These new schools should be innovative, moving away from the one-size-fits-all outdated factory model of education.

CONCLUSION

Nothing will impact the future of our country more than the education of the next generation—our future leaders, society, workforce, economy, and electorate. The historical education freedom legislative wins over the past four years must continue until all children in our nation have access to school choice.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Get Informed

Learn more about school choice. Visit:

- [The School Choice Programs Democrats Hate Have Saved Taxpayers Up to \\$45 Billion](#)
- [Parents Reward School Choice Candidates at Ballot Boxes Across the Country](#)
- [Takeaways: Education Savings Accounts](#)

Talk to Your Friends

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Share this information, tell them about what's going on, and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

Become a Leader in the Community

Start an Independent Women's Network chapter group so you can get together with friends each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

Remain Engaged Politically

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

Connect with IWF! Follow us on:

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Please visit us on our website iwf.org to get more information and consider making a donation to IWF.

ABOUT INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility. IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.