

School Choice in America

Testimony before the House Education and Workforce Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education subcommittee.

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Good morning Chairman Kiley, Ranking Member Bonamici, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. My name is Michael McShane, and I am the Director of National Research at EdChoice, a non-profit organization based in Indianapolis, Indiana whose mission is to advance educational freedom and choice for all as a pathway to successful lives and a stronger society. To be clear, though, today I speak only for myself and nothing I say should be construed as an institutional position of EdChoice.

Seventy years ago, EdChoice's co-founder, Nobel laureate economist Milton Friedman, wrote a short essay titled *The Role of Government in Education*. In it, he argued that government had a role in funding and regulating education, but did not need to directly operate it. Independent and autonomous schools could educate children and parents could choose between different school models based on their needs and desires. This idea, school choice, is the topic of today's hearing.

He closed the piece by predicting what such a system might yield, writing:

“The result of these measures would be a sizable reduction in the direct activities of government, yet a great widening in the educational opportunities open to our children. They would bring a healthy increase in the variety of educational institutions available and in competition among them. Private initiative and enterprise would quicken the pace of progress in this area as it has in so many others.”¹

We are not yet in Milton Friedman's ideal system, but growth in educational options in recent years has redirected the American education system towards his vision, and we have some initial findings to see if his predictions have come true.

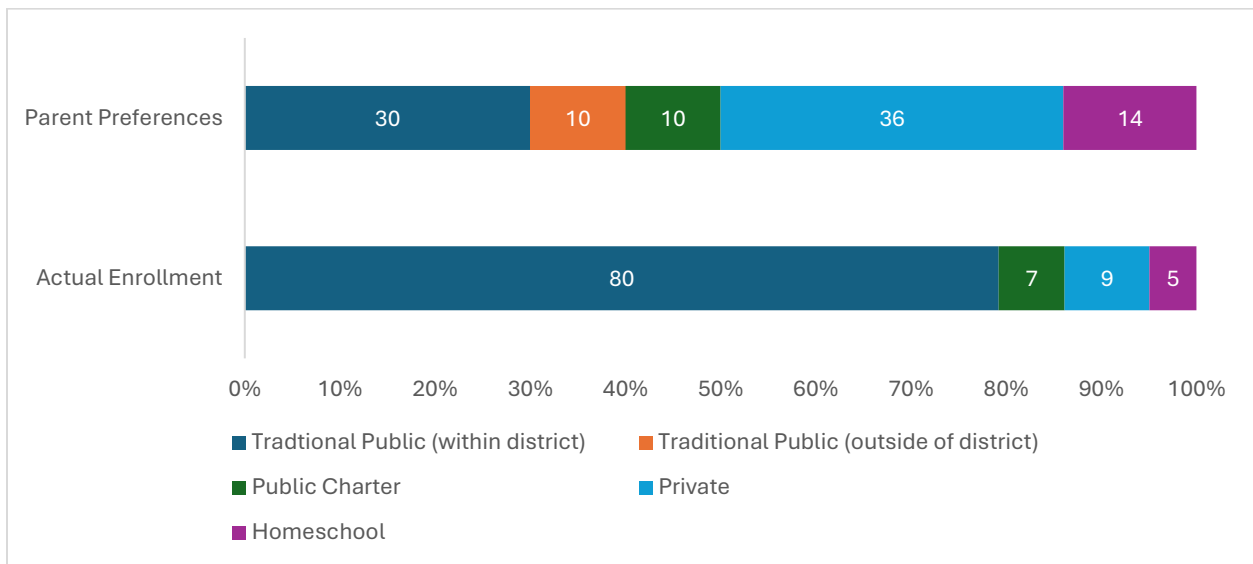
So what do we know about school choice in America today? I'd like to make four brief points. First, parents want more options. Second, the market is responding to parental demands. Third, parents have diverse desires from schools and diverse reasons for choosing. Fourth, school choice has been studied extensively, and the weight of the evidence is positive.

I. Parents Want More Options

EdChoice’s 2024 *Schooling in America Survey* asked a nationally representative sample of parents where they would like to send their children to school.² Parents were split between traditional public schools, both inside and outside of their assigned district, public charter schools, private schools, and homeschooling.

Unfortunately, as the second bar of Figure 1 shows, that is not what actual enrollment patterns look like. While 36% of parents would like to send their child to a private school, only 9% actually do. Almost three times as many parents would like to homeschool than actually do, and more families would like charter school options.

Figure 1. Parent preferences versus actual enrollment, 2024



This gap, between actual enrollments and parent preferences, is where school choice policy comes in.

There is an important point to emphasize here. School choice *policies* and *school choice* are not one and the same. Many people in America already have school choice. They choose schools by purchasing a home zoned for a desirable public school or they pay for private school tuition. The question of school choice policy is not *whether or not* there will be school choice in America, but rather *who* will have it. Not everyone can afford that house zoned for the desirable public school or have the extra income to pay for private schooling. School choice programs work to expand the set of people in America who can choose where their child attends school.

II. The Market is Responding

Back in 1955, Dr. Friedman predicted that an expansion of choice would lead to both “a great widening in the educational opportunities open to our children” and “a healthy

increase in the variety of educational institutions available.” Both of these predictions have come true.

As a result of school choice programs, there are now 8,150 charter schools educating 3.7 million students, 3,105 magnet schools educating 2.7 million students, more than 415,000 students enrolled in open enrollment programs, and more than 6,750 private schools participating in choice programs educating 1.2 million students.³

Choice programs have nurtured the growth of different school models, from progressive Montessori and Waldorf schools to more traditional classical schools; schools from a variety of faith traditions and secular schools; microschoools, hybrid homeschools, co-ops, and probably new models that I don’t even know about yet.

This represents a vindication of Dr. Friedman’s predictions from all those years ago.

III. Parents Choose for Diverse Reasons

EdChoice’s 2024 *Schooling in America Survey* asked a nationally representative sample of parents why they chose their child’s school.⁴ Answers varied, particularly by school sector. Table 1 depicts these differences by the percentage of parents from each school type listing the reason in their top three. The three most popular answers for each sector are shaded.

Table 1. Parental Reasons for choosing their child’s school

Factor	Public District School	Public Charter School	Private School	Homeschool
Location/ Close to Home or Work	44%	25%	19%	19%
Socialization/Peers/Other Students	34%	21%	19%	15%
Assigned District/Neighborhood School	31%	9%	9%	9%
Safe Environment	25%	37%	36%	53%
Academic Quality or Reputation	26%	36%	36%	23%
Extracurricular Activities	22%	20%	16%	10%
Diversity	17%	13%	9%	7%
Structure, Discipline	13%	21%	24%	24%
Morals/Character/Values Instruction	16%	23%	31%	30%
School Size	11%	18%	16%	9%
Individual/One-on-One Attention	11%	19%	20%	38%
Class Size	12%	21%	17%	14%
Test Scores	10%	16%	15%	11%
Religious Environment/Instruction	5%	8%	19%	

Source: EdChoice, 2024 Schooling in America Survey (conducted April 9–April 30, 2024), Q5-8

The top three reasons traditional public school parents chose their child’s school were “location/close to home or work,” “socialization/peers/other students,” and then because that school was their assigned district or neighborhood school. The top three reasons for charter school parents were “safe environment,” “academic quality or reputation,” and

“location/close to home or work.” The top three reasons for private school parents were “safe environment,” “academic quality or reputation,” and “morals/character/values instruction.” The top three reasons for homeschool parents were “safe environment,” “individual/one-on-one attention,” and “morals/character/values instruction.”

There appears to be both a *pull* and a *push* into school choices. Parents are attracted to safer and more positive school environments, higher quality educational options, and more attention for their child. But parents are also repelled by negative factors in schools they are leaving.

In a separate poll, conducted in August of 2024 in conjunction with Morning Consult, EdChoice asked parents who had switched schools about negative experiences that they had in their child’s previous school. The results were sobering. Stress, anxiety, and bullying were present in a frighteningly large number of schools that families left. Thirty-one percent of parents reported “excessing stress or anxiety” in their child’s previous school, 28% reported bullying, and 25% said that their child’s academic needs were not being met.⁵

IV. Choice Has Been Studied Extensively and the Weight of the Evidence is Positive

EdChoice’s 2024 publication, the *123s of School Choice*, summarized the results of 188 studies of private school choice.⁶ These include studies of the effect of private school choice on participating students’ test scores, participating students’ educational attainment (including graduating from high school and matriculating to higher education), parent satisfaction, civic values and practices, school safety, and racial and ethnic integration. These also include studies of the impact of private school choice on students who remain in public schools and choice programs’ fiscal impact.

When looking at the findings of these studies, they weigh heavily towards positive benefits for private school choice programs. Table 2 presents the results.

Table 2: Study Counts of the Effect of Private School Choice

Outcome	Number of Studies	Positive Effect	No Visible Effect	Negative Effect
Program Participant Test Scores (RCT)	17	11	4	2
Educational Attainment	7	5	2	0
Parent Satisfaction	33	31	1	2
Public School Student Test Scores	29	26	1	2
Civic Values and Practices	11	6	5	0
Integration	8	7	1	0
Fiscal Effects	75	69	5	5
School Safety	8	8	0	0
Totals	188	163	19	11

Source: The 123s of School Choice

In addition to these findings, a 2021 meta-analysis (a form of research design that combines findings across multiple studies to find a single estimate of an intervention's impact) found that students in U.S. private school choice programs experienced positive gains on test scores in both reading and math. Importantly, the authors also note that, "the longer a sample of voucher students has been treated, the larger and more positive the achievement effects tend to be."⁷ Another meta-analysis, conducted in 2019 on the effects of private school choice on students who remain in public school, concluded, "In general, competition resulting from school-choice policies does have a small positive effect on student achievement. The lack of an overall negative impact on student outcomes might ease critics' concerns that competition will hurt those students 'left behind' due to school-choice policies."⁸ What's more, a 2023 paper in the *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* found that as Florida's private school choice program grew and matured, the authors "observe growing benefits (higher standardized test scores and lower absenteeism and suspension rates) to students attending public schools with more preprogram private school option" and that, "effects are particularly pronounced for lower-income students, but results are positive for more affluent students as well."⁹

The research is generally positive for charter schooling as well. A 2018 meta-analysis concluded, "On the question of the average overall effect, for no grade span or subject tested did we find a negative average effect of charter schools. For five out of 12 combinations of grades and subject areas, we found a positive and significant overall effect of charter schools on achievement. (For six of the remaining seven cases, the estimated average effect was positive but not statistically significant.) The results are more compelling for math than reading, both in terms of the number of grade spans for which we found significant effects, and the magnitude of those significant effects."¹⁰ A national market-level analysis of charter schooling published in the *Journal of Public Economics* in 2023 found that increasing the market share of charter schools in a community drove increases in both student achievement and attainment. The authors conclude that, "The main mechanism appears to be the participant effect, though competitive effects are increasing in the participant effect and driven partly by the closure of low-performing traditional public schools."¹¹ There is also evidence of a positive impact of charter schools on students who remain in public schools, with a large 2024 study of Florida finding, "We consistently find that competition stemming from the opening of new charter schools improves reading—but not math—performance and it also decreases absenteeism of students who remain in the [Traditional Public Schools]."¹²

Score another point for Dr. Friedman. Private initiative and enterprise has quickened the pace of progress in this area as it has in so many others.

Conclusion

So where does this leave us? Moving forward, we can return to Dr. Friedman's wisdom from all those years ago. He wrote in *The Role of Government in Education* that in his ideal

system, the “government would serve its proper function of improving the operation of the invisible hand without substituting the dead hand of bureaucracy.” That is the work before us.

Many students and families across this country still want more options. To meet their needs, we need to learn from the programs states are implementing to refine and improve them. We need to address other challenges that students and schools face. Whether it is new schools finding appropriate spaces to operate and great teachers to instruct their students or families finding information about what options are available to them or transportation to their ideal school, challenges remain.

Dr. Friedman did not predict that expanding school choice would lead to a perfect education system or a perfect society. Any program run by human beings will make mistakes, face challenges, and run into problems. But, working together, we can overcome them and provide the quality education that every child in our great nation deserves.

¹ Milton Friedman (1962/1982), *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press); earlier version (1955) in Robert A. Solo (Ed.), *Economics and the Public Interest*, pp. 123-144 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press).

² Colyn Ritter, Alli Aldis, John Kristof, and Paul DiPerna (2024) *2024 Schooling in America: Public Opinion on K–12 Education, Transparency, Technology, and School Choice*. EdChoice. Available at: <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/2024-Schooling-in-America.pdf>

³ Private school choice numbers calculated from EdChoice (2024) *The ABCs of School Choice: The comprehensive guide to every private school choice program in America*. EdChoice. Available at: <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2025-ABCs-of-School-Choice.pdf>. Other enrollment numbers drawn from: Colyn Ritter (2025) *2025 EdChoice Share: Exploring Where America’s Students Are Educated*, available at: <https://www.edchoice.org/engage/2025-edchoice-share-exploring-where-americas-students-are-educated/>

⁴ Colyn Ritter, Alli Aldis, John Kristof, and Paul DiPerna (2024) *2024 Schooling in America: Public Opinion on K–12 Education, Transparency, Technology, and School Choice*. EdChoice. Available at: <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/2024-Schooling-in-America.pdf>

⁵ EdChoice and Morning Consult (2024, August) *The Public, Parents, and K-12 Education: A National Polling Report*. Available at: <https://edchoice.morningconsultintelligence.com/assets/322747.pdf>

⁶ EdChoice (2024), *The 123s of School Choice: What the Research Says about Private School Choice Programs in America, 2024 edition*, retrieved from: <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/2024-123s-of-School-Choice.pdf>

⁷ M. Danish Shakeel, Katilin P. Anderson, & Patrick J Wolf (2021). The participant effects of private school vouchers around the globe: a meta-analytic and systematic review. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 32(4), 509–542. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2021.1906283>

⁸ Huriya Jabbar et al. (2019), *The Competitive Effects of School Choice on Student Achievement: A Systematic Review*, *Education Policy*

⁹ David N. Figlio, Cassandra M. D. Hart, and Krzysztof Karbownik. 2023. "Effects of Maturing Private School Choice Programs on Public School Students." *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 15 (4): 255–94. Available at: <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/pol.20210710>

¹⁰ Julian R. Betts and Y. Emily Tang (2018) “A Meta-Analysis of the Effect of Charter Schools on Student Achievement” San Diego Education Research Alliance at UC San Diego (SanDERA). Available at: <https://sander.ucsd.edu/publications/DISC%20PAPER%20Betts%20Tang%20Charter%20Lit%20Review%202018%2001.pdf>

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- ¹¹ Feng Chen and Douglas Harris (2023) “The market-level effects of charter schools on student outcomes: A national analysis of school districts.” *Journal of Public Economics*. Vol 228 Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0047272723001974?via%3Dihub>
- ¹² David N. Figlio, Cassandra Hart, and Krzysztof Karbownik (2024, February) “Competitive Effects of Charter Schools” NBER Working Paper No. 32120. Available at: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w32120>