

**School Choice: Expanding Educational Freedom for All**

**Testimony before**

**Committee on Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Early Childhood,  
Elementary, and Secondary Education**

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My name is Lindsey Burke. I am the Director of the Center for Education Policy at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

Over the past decade, states have increasingly adopted private school choice options such as vouchers, tax credit scholarships, and education savings accounts (ESAs). The past two years have seen particularly impressive growth with six states adopting universal education choice options open to all families in the state, four of which have done so just this spring. What began in earnest as an academic idea proffered by Nobel laureate economist Milton Friedman in 1955 in his seminal essay *The Role of Government in Education* is now becoming mainstream public policy – a cornerstone of state efforts to restore parental control in education and improve learning outcomes for students.<sup>1</sup>

Although Friedman popularized the school voucher concept in 1955, it would be another 35 years before the first modern-day school choice program was enacted, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program in Wisconsin in 1990. The Wisconsin program was followed in 1996 by Ohio's Cleveland Scholarship Program and by 2000, 10 private school choice programs, including tax credits, deductions, and vouchers, were in operation across the country. A decade later, in 2010, the number had grown to 26 such programs.

Notably, in 2011, Arizona established the nation's first education savings account (ESA) option. With an ESA, families receive 90 percent of what would have been spent on their child in public school in the form of a parent-controlled savings account. These funds can be accessed from a restricted-use account that can be used to pay for multiple education-related services, products, and providers, including private school tuition and private tutors, among other options.

Today, more states than ever have education choice options in place. As of March 2023, 13 states have education savings accounts or ESA-style accounts, 15 have school vouchers programs, and 21 give families access to tax credit scholarships. Each of these options enable students to select learning environments that are safe, effective, and most importantly, reflect their families' values.

### **Empirical Evaluations of School Choice**

The benefits of education choice are numerous and as school choice options expand, these benefits are being demonstrated empirically through a growing body of rigorous scientific research.

*Improved academic outcomes.* To date, researchers have conducted 18 randomized controlled trial evaluations of the effect of school choice on students' academic outcomes. RCTs are the "gold standard" of scientific research because differences in the outcome variable of interest between the control and experiment groups can be attributed to the policy intervention in question as a result of randomization, enabling researchers to draw causal conclusions to a high degree of certainty. Of the 18 RCTs conducted on the academic effects of school choice, 12 find

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<sup>1</sup> Friedman, M. (1955). The role of government in education. *Economics and the public interest* (Solo, R. A., ed.). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, pp. 123-144.

positive effects for some or all students, four find neutral effects, and two find negative effects.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting, however, that those two negative evaluations were unique to Louisiana, home to the most heavily regulated school choice program in the country. Evidence suggests that this overly burdensome regulatory environment diminished program outcomes as lower-performing private schools that were already experiencing student attrition prior to program entry were willing to incur regulations to participate in the program in a way higher performing schools were not.<sup>3</sup> The bulk of scientifically rigorous evaluations are unambiguous about the positive academic effects school choice has on students' academic achievement outcomes.

The following table produced by Dr. Patrick Wolf at the University of Arkansas shows the universe of experimental evaluations conducted to date on the effect of private school choice on student math and reading achievement.

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<sup>2</sup> Review conducted by Patrick J. Wolf, *The Academic & Civic Effects of School Choice*. University of Arkansas. April 11, 2023. Positive effects for some or all students: 1) Cowen, Joshua M. "School Choice as a Latent Variable: Estimating the 'Complier Average Causal Effect' of Vouchers in Charlotte." *Policy Studies Journal* 36, no. 2 (May 2008), pp. 301-15.; 2) Greene, Jay P. "Vouchers in Charlotte," *Education Next* 1, no. 2 (Summer 2001), pp. 55-60. [http://educationnext.org/files/ednext20012\\_46b.pdf](http://educationnext.org/files/ednext20012_46b.pdf).; 3) Greene, Jay P., Paul E. Peterson, and Jiangtao Du. "Effectiveness of School Choice: The Milwaukee Experiment." *Education and Urban Society* 31, no. 2 (Jan. 1999), pp. 190-213.; 4) Rouse, Cecilia E. "Private School Vouchers and Student Achievement: An Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 113, no. 2 (May 1998), pp. 553-602.; 5) Lamarche, Carlos. "Private school vouchers and student achievement: A fixed effects quantile regression evaluation." *Labour Economics* 15, no. 4 (August 2008), pp. 575-590.; 6) William G. Howell, Patrick J. Wolf, David E. Campbell, and Paul E. Peterson (2002). *School Vouchers and Academic Performance: Results from Three Randomized Field Trials [D.C. trial]*. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 21(2), pp. 191–217.; 7) Patrick J. Wolf, Brian Kisida, Babette Gutmann, Michael Puma, Nada Eissa, and Lou Rizo (2013). *School Vouchers and Student Outcomes: Experimental Evidence from Washington, D.C.* *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 32(2), pp. 246–270.; 8) Kaitlin P. Anderson and Patrick J. Wolf, "Evaluating School Vouchers: Evidence from a Within-Study Comparison," *Education Reform Faculty and Graduate Student Publications*. (2017). Null effects: 1) Barnard, John, Constantine E. Frangakis, Jennifer L. Hill, and Donald B. Rubin. "Principal Stratification Approach to Broken Randomized Experiments: A Case Study of School Choice Vouchers in New York City." *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 98, no. 462 (June 2003), pp. 299-323.; 2) Jin, Hui, John Barnard, and Donald B. Rubin. "A Modified General Location Model for Noncompliance with Missing Data: Revisiting the New York City School Choice Scholarship Program using Principal Stratification." *Journal of Educational and Behavioral Statistics* 35, no. 2 (Apr. 2010), pp. 154-73.; 3) William G. Howell, Patrick J. Wolf, David E. Campbell, and Paul E. Peterson (2002). *School Vouchers and Academic Performance: Results from Three Randomized Field Trials [New York trial]*. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 21(2), pp. 191–217.; 4) William G. Howell, Patrick J. Wolf, David E. Campbell, and Paul E. Peterson (2002). *School Vouchers and Academic Performance: Results from Three Randomized Field Trials [Dayton trial]*. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 21(2), pp. 191–217. Negative effects: 1) Abdulkadiroglu, Atila, Parag A. Pathak, and Christopher R. Walters. "School Vouchers and Student Achievement: First-Year Evidence from the Louisiana Scholarship Program." NBER Working Paper 21839. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2015.; and 2) Mills, Jonathan N., and Patrick J. Wolf. *The Effects of the Louisiana Scholarship Program on Student Achievement after Two Years*. Louisiana Scholarship Program Evaluation Report 1. Fayetteville: Univ. of Ark., School Choice Demonstration Project; New Orleans: Tulane Univ., Education Research Alliance, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Lee, Matthew H. and Mills, Jonathan and Wolf, Patrick, *Heterogeneous Impacts Across Schools in the First Four Years of the Louisiana Scholarship Program* (April 23, 2019). EDRE Working Paper No. 2019-11.

## The Impact of School Choice on Math and Reading Achievement

Benefit	Study	City	Finding for Private School Choice
<b>All Students (8)</b>	Cowen (2008)	Charlotte	+8 points in reading, +7 points in math
	Greene (2001)	Charlotte	+6 points on combined reading and math test
	Greene et al. (1999)	Milwaukee	+6 points in reading, +11 points in math
	Rouse (1998)	Milwaukee	+8 points in math, no difference in reading
	Lamarche (2008)	Milwaukee	+2.3 points in math, no difference in reading
	Howell et al. (2002)	D.C.	+3 points combined reading and math
	Wolf et al. (2013)	D.C.	+4.8 points in reading
	Anderson & Wolf (2017)	D.C.	+8.7 points in reading
<b>Some Students (4)</b>	Barnard et al. (2003)	New York	+5 points in math for students leaving low-performing schools
	Jin et al. (2010)	New York	+4 points in math for students leaving low-performing schools
	Howell et al. (2002)	New York	+4 points for African-American students on combined reading/math test
	Howell et al. (2002)	Dayton	+6.5 points for African-American students on combined reading/math test
<b>No Effects (4)</b>	Webber et al. (2019)	D.C.	No difference in math or reading
	Krueger & Zhu (2004)	New York	No difference in math or reading
	Bitler et al. (2013)	New York	No difference in math or reading by quartile
	Bettinger & Slonim (2006)	Toledo	No difference in math or reading
<b>Negative (2)</b>	Abdulkadiroglu et al. (2016)	Louisiana	-0.4 standard deviation 1-year effect on math
	Mills & Wolf (2019)	Louisiana	4-year effects on math, reading, and science of -0.21 to -0.39 standard deviation

**SOURCE:** Literature review conducted by Patrick J. Wolf, "The Academic & Civic Effects of School Choice," University of Arkansas, April 11, 2023.

*Increased academic attainment.* In addition to improving academic achievement outcomes, access to school choice significantly increases students' likelihood of graduating high school and enrolling in college. Of the seven experimental evaluations conducted to date on the effect of school choice on academic attainment (e.g., outcome variables such as graduating high school, enrolling in college, earning a college degree), six find statistically significant positive effects for some or all students, and one finds null effects. No rigorous studies find a negative effect on academic attainment.<sup>4</sup> One study is particularly noteworthy: the Congressionally mandated

<sup>4</sup> See: 1) Patrick J. Wolf, Brian Kisida, Babette Gutmann, Michael Puma, Nada Eissa, and Lou Rizo (2013). School Vouchers and Student Outcomes: Experimental Evidence from Washington, DC. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 32(2), pp. 246–270., 2) Matthew M. Chingos and Paul E. Peterson, Experimentally estimated impacts of school vouchers on college enrollment and degree attainment, *Journal of Public Economics*, Vol. 122, Feb. 2015,

randomized controlled trial evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, a voucher option for children from low-income families right here in the Nation's Capital. Participating students were 21 percentage points more likely to graduate from high school than their peers in the control group who did not receive a scholarship.<sup>5</sup> You will be hard-pressed to find another policy intervention as successful as the D.C. OSP has been on students' academic attainment.

*Competitive effects.* Researchers have also evaluated the competitive effects of education choice. Of the 28 empirical evaluations to date (using rigorous matching and longitudinal methods), 26 find positive benefits for all students, one finds no effect, and one finds a negative effect.<sup>6</sup> For example, Professor David Figlio's (2014) evaluation of over 3 million students demonstrated, using sophisticated statistical methods, that Florida's tax credit scholarship program improved learning outcomes for students in public schools. He and co-author Cassandra Hart found that academic outcomes improved for students in public schools as a result of increased competition, "especially those that faced the greatest financial incentives to retain students," they write in the *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*.<sup>7</sup>

*Improved civic values and character development.* There are numerous additional (non-academic) benefits that flow from the introduction of school choice options. School choice has been empirically demonstrated to have positive effects on civic engagement<sup>8</sup> and crime reduction,<sup>9</sup> to improve student safety,<sup>10</sup> and to have positive impacts on character as seen in

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pp. 1-12. [This represents two studies as Chingos and Peterson conducted a follow-up evaluation], 3) Albert Cheng and Paul E. Peterson (2020), Experimentally Estimated Impacts of School Vouchers on Educational Attainments of Moderately and Severely Disadvantaged Students (PEPG 20-02) [This represents two studies as Cheng and Peterson conducted a follow-up evaluation]., 4) Heidi H. Erickson, Jonathan N. Mills and Patrick J. Wolf (2021): The Effects of the Louisiana Scholarship Program on Student Achievement and College Entrance, *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*., 5) Matthew Chingos and Brian Kisida, *School Vouchers and College Enrollment: Experimental Evidence from Washington, D.C.* (2022). *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick J. Wolf, Brian Kisida, Babette Gutmann, Michael Puma, Nada Eissa, and Lou Rizo (2013). *School Vouchers and Student Outcomes: Experimental Evidence from Washington, DC*. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 32(2), pp. 246–270.

<sup>6</sup> Review conducted by Patrick J. Wolf, *The Academic & Civic Effects of School Choice*. University of Arkansas. April 11, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Figlio, David, and Cassandra M. D. Hart. 2014. "Competitive Effects of Means-Tested School Vouchers." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 6 (1): 133-56.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick J. Wolf, Civics Exam: Schools of Choice Boost Civic Values, *EducationNext*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer 2007), pp. 66- 73.

<sup>9</sup> Corey DeAngelis and Patrick J. Wolf, Private School Choice and Crime: Evidence from Milwaukee, *Social Science Quarterly*, July 7, 2019, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ssqu.12698>

<sup>10</sup> Ann Webber, Ning Rui, Roberta Garrison-Mogren, Robert B. Olsen, Babette Gutmann, and Meredith Bachman, Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts Three Years After Students Applied, *Institute of Education Sciences*, May 2019, at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED594875.pdf>

outcomes such as increased charitable giving,<sup>11</sup> positive effects on tolerance of others,<sup>12</sup> increased political participation,<sup>13</sup> and higher levels of voluntarism.<sup>14</sup>

From significantly increased academic achievement and attainment outcomes to positive impacts on civic values and character development, it is no wonder parents who have access to private school choice options are more satisfied with their children's educational experiences.<sup>15</sup>

### **Choice Provides Accountability to Families**

School choice is providing long-overdue accountability to families. When an assigned public school is poor-performing, families in areas with education choice now have the ability to hold that school accountable by taking their child's share of education funding elsewhere. When a district school is failing or unsafe, school choice provides an exit option previously foreclosed to most families. But school choice is far more than an escape hatch; it is the mechanism that will create a rising tide that will lift all boats.

We've all seen the data on the negative impact union-imposed school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic had on students' academic outcomes and mental health. On the most recent administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), student math scores fell eight points for eighth graders and reading scores declined three points. Experts say this equates to wiping out two decades of academic progress.<sup>16</sup> This was not the case in private schools, particularly within the Catholic school sector. As Kathleen Porter-Magee writes in the *Wall Street Journal*,

“if all U.S. Catholic schools were a state, their 1.6 million students would rank first in the nation across the NAEP reading and math tests for fourth and eighth graders.

...achievement among black students enrolled in Catholic schools increased by 10 points (about an extra year's worth of learning), while black students in public schools lost 5 points and black students in charter schools lost 8 points.”<sup>17</sup>

Public school underperformance is not confined to the pandemic era. Overall, just 26 percent of eighth graders are proficient in math and just 31 percent of eighth graders are proficient in

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Bettinger and Robert Slonim, Using Experimental Economics to Measure the Effects of a Natural Educational Experiment on Altruism, *Journal of Public Economics*, Vol. 90, No 809 (2006), pp. 1625 – 1648.

<sup>12</sup> David J. Fleming, William Mitchell, and Michael McNally, Can Markets Make Citizens? School Vouchers, Political Tolerance, and Civic Engagement, *Journal of School Choice*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2014), pp. 213 – 236.

<sup>13</sup> Corey A. DeAngelis and Patrick J. Wolf, Will Democracy Endure Private School Choice? The Effect of the Milwaukee Parental School Choice Program on Adult Voting Behavior, *The Journal of Private Enterprise*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Summer 2019), pp. 1 – 21.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick J. Wolf, Civics Exam, *EducationNext*, Vol. 7, No. 3, at <https://www.educationnext.org/civics-exam/>

<sup>15</sup> Albert Cheng and Paul E. Peterson, How Satisfied are Parents with Their Children's Schools? *EducationNext*, Vol. 17, No. 2., at <https://www.educationnext.org/how-satisfied-are-parents-with-childrens-schools-us-dept-ed-survey/>

<sup>16</sup> Jake Bryant, Emma Dorn, Leah Pollack, and Jimmy Sarakatsannis, COVID-19 learning delay and recovery: Where do US states stand? McKinsey & Company, January 11, 2023, at [The COVID-19 pandemic learning loss and recovery | McKinsey](#)

<sup>17</sup> Kathleen Porter-Magee, Amid the Pandemic, Progress in Catholic Schools, *The Wall Street Journal*, October 27, 2022, at [Amid the Pandemic, Progress in Catholic Schools - WSJ](#)

reading. District school underperformance has too often been rewarded with additional government spending when it should have been acknowledged and addressed. Education choice provides that course correction, aligning K-12 education with the rest of the American experience: one based on free choice and the accountability to consumers created through competition, even in the case of publicly funded programs. Pell Grant recipients aren't assigned to particular colleges; food stamp recipients aren't assigned to the grocery store closest to their home. Yet in K-12 education, students are assigned to the district public school closest to where their parents can afford to buy a home, even if that school is a poor fit for that child. It's time to break the link between housing and schooling and fund families directly, just as we do in higher education.

Support for school choice is at an all-time high. According to the 2022 EducationNext survey, 61 percent of respondents support tax credit scholarships, a figure which soars to over 70 percent for black and Hispanic families. A majority of parents also support education savings accounts and universal school vouchers.<sup>18</sup> Congress has a role to play in answering this call for education freedom.

### **Opportunities for Congress**

Although school choice is primarily a state policy, there is a role for Congress to play in advancing education freedom, starting with areas over which Congress has ultimate authority. Congress should: 1) secure and expand the highly successful D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, formula funding the program, transitioning it from a voucher to ESA model, and making it universally available to all D.C. families; 2) make Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act funding portable, following students to learning environments of choice, 3) provide education savings accounts to Native American Students who must currently attend underperforming Bureau of Indian Education schools; and 4) provide education savings accounts to children from active-duty military families, the vast majority of whom are assigned to the district school closet to their parent's assigned duty station.

There has never been a more exciting time to work in education policy. There's never been a more exciting time to be the parent of a school-aged child. Because for the first time, as of this year, a majority of students will live in states that offer some form of education choice. Freedom is finally coming to K-12 education, and American families will benefit greatly.

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<sup>18</sup> 2022 Education Next Survey, at <https://www.educationnext.org/2022-ednext-poll-interactive/>

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