



CENTER FOR EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY

School Choice Empowers Families and Creates Greater Student Outcomes

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Quality education offers a pathway to the fulfillment of one's dreams and intergenerational upward mobility. Every American family and student deserves this opportunity, but unfortunately, our Nation's public education system today is failing far too many Americans. In light of the severe disruption and loss of learning that occurred last year for millions of students who suffered from prolonged school closures because of COVID-19, now is the time to dissect the educational failings of our public school system and institute reforms that put America back on a path to greater educational opportunity. We must determine how we can ensure that students and parents are never again held hostage by complex, arguably bureaucratic, and in any instance unionized public-school systems, that families are given the power to choose the educational path that best suits their children, and that our school systems are responsive to the unique needs of its students.

The America First Policy Institute (AFPI) will address these systematic challenges by developing research and policies that advance educational opportunities for all families. The Institute understands the importance of putting parents and students in charge of the education of America's next generation. Increased graduation rates, improved future financial well-being, crime reduction, and higher parent satisfaction are all results that can be achieved with education choice for families across the United States. Since the onset of the pandemic, parents have an increased motivation to push for education reform that expands educational opportunities for their children. This report lays out various school choice options and how they affect students and families, and it explores how states are making progress to efficiently spend their increased COVID-19 federal dollars to better serve every American student. Putting American families and students first is critical to the pursuit of improving the quality of K-12 education and thus our Nation.

SCHOOL CHOICE ACROSS THE UNITED STATES

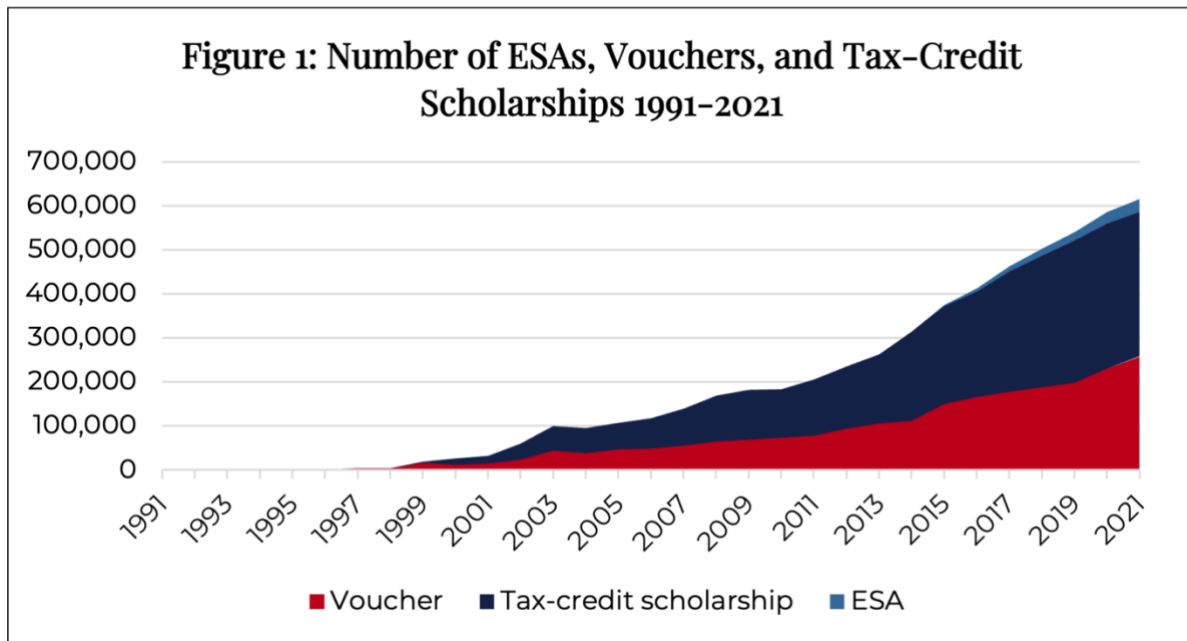
In 1990, Wisconsin established the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program as the first significant school choice program in the United States; the private school voucher program still operates today ([Witte, 1998](#)). Since then, school choice policies and programs, including publicly funded charter schools, continue to spread across the Nation. Parents appear to approve, with the American Federation for Children finding in a recent poll that 71 percent of voters supported school choice and 65 percent of parents supported a portion of the

money spent per student be used for home, virtual, or private education if public schools did not reopen for in-person classes ([2021](#)). This year alone, twelve states have enacted 15 pieces of legislation to expand school choice. There is currently one bill passed in Missouri awaiting the governor's signature, and many states still have several bills in motion, some of which do not currently have school choice options ([American Federation for Children, 2021](#)).

In the 2000-2001 school year, there were 1,993 charter schools in 35 states and the District of Columbia serving 1 percent of students enrolled in traditional U.S. public schools ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2018](#)). Nearly 20 years later, there are more than 7,500 charter schools in the United States serving 3.3 million students—15 percent of total fall enrollment in public schools ([White, Snyderman & Xu, 2020](#)). Private schools, as of 2017, enrolled 5.7 million students. Relative to the 50 million students in traditional public schools, these numbers imply that charter schools and private schools together serve about 18 percent of our Nation's students ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2020](#)). The availability of options created by school choice, such as charter schools and private schools, provides increased opportunities and access to quality education, which especially benefits students from historically distressed communities. This is particularly important for the 12.6 million students who currently live in poverty in the United States and are considered at-risk and in need of additional support ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2020](#)). Multiple research studies provide evidence that negative childhood experiences, like poverty, are associated with lower student achievement and negative outcomes into adulthood ([Hughes & Tucker, 2018](#)). These at-risk students need intensive interventions in the best schools. School choice policies seek to help all students by expanding the eligibility of students to enroll in better schools regardless of zip code while also putting pressure on all schools to improve through the power of accountability. For many families with at-risk students stuck in badly performing schools, choice offers what may be the only avenue to high-quality education ([Eggleston & Fields, 2021](#)).

Many states have already implemented some school choice programs. The ongoing success of these programs is creating momentum for more states to establish school choice options of their own for the first time, casting aside the one-size-fits-all education model that fails all too many students. In addition, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that school choice options like voucher programs, tax-credit scholarships, education savings accounts (ESAs), and charter schools are producing positive long-term outcomes for students nationwide.

Figure 1 depicts the number of school choice programs via education savings accounts, vouchers, and tax-credit scholarships nationwide. There are currently about 539,000 private school choice programs across the United States ([The White House, 2020](#)).



School vouchers enable parents to choose any school, public or private, for their child to attend. Vouchers provide money to parents that they can put toward tuition costs for their child’s school instead of the funds going directly to the school district, with the size of the voucher often reflective of average per-pupil costs in an area ([EdChoice, 2021](#)). At this time, there are approximately 200,000 school vouchers being utilized by families pursuing school choice across the country. As an example, Washington, D.C.’s voucher program, *The D.C. Opportunity Scholars Program (OSP)*, is the only federally-funded voucher program in the United States and today provides choice to students from disadvantaged families by offering them vouchers of \$8,000 per year for K-8 and \$12,000 for high school ([U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2013](#)). As will be discussed in greater detail later in this report, multiple studies have found beneficial effects of the OSP Scholarship program regarding educational attainment and parental satisfaction.

Tax-credit scholarships are another and the fastest-growing type of school choice. These programs provide incentives for businesses and individuals to donate to a nonprofit organization that provides private school scholarships to eligible students. In exchange for their donation, donors receive a tax credit from the state ([National Conference of State Legislatures, 2017](#)). There are 22 tax credit scholarship programs in 18 different states ([EdChoice, 2020](#)). The donor’s tax liability depends on the program’s characteristics. Eleven of the 22 programs currently allow donors to claim 100 percent of their donations as tax credits. The remaining 11 programs allow donors to claim from 50-85 percent of their donations as state tax credits ([EdChoice, 2021](#)).

One of the most prominent examples of tax-credit scholarships is the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program—the country’s largest program. It offers a tax credit against corporate income taxes and insurance premium taxes to entities that donate to Scholarship Funding Organizations (SFO). These SFOs then award scholarships averaging \$6,815 to students from eligible families. Families with income at or below 260 percent of the federal poverty level—roughly \$68,900 annually for a family of four—qualify for either partial or full scholarships. Students in families earning under 200 percent of the poverty level, which is currently \$53,000 for a family of four, can receive full scholarships worth up to \$9,197, while students in families with income between 200 percent and 260 percent of the federal poverty level can be awarded partial scholarships ([Florida Department of Education, 2016](#)) ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021](#)). Students eligible for the free and reduced lunch program or are returning students applying for a scholarship are considered the priority ([EdChoice, 2021](#)). More than 400,000 students have access to schools of their choice through Tax Credit Scholarships ([Florida Department of Education, 2020](#)). [Research detailed later in this report indicates that the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program can raise educational outcomes for direct participants and students in traditional public schools exposed to the greater accountability that school choice provides.](#)

Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) are government-authorized savings accounts for parents to use for K-12 educational needs such as tuition, tutoring, instructional materials, services for students with specific learning needs, and other education-specific programs. Arizona was the first state to adopt ESAs in 2011. These savings accounts help in cases where states have policies that prevent the use of public money to fund private schools. Parents are provided with a set sum, usually in a debit account, which they can use for the variety of education services mentioned above.

One of the most innovative programs is the North Carolina Personal Education Savings Account program, which can be used in conjunction with other North Carolina school choice voucher programs. The total ESA value for one school year is \$9,000 per student and is limited to K-12 students with identified disabilities as outlined in an individualized education program (IEP). Partial ESAs up to \$4,500 are permitted if a child attends both public school part-time and a private school that serves only students with special learning needs. Since the 2018-2019 school year, North Carolina continues to appropriate \$3.4 million for this program, averaging a value of \$8,900 for students ([EdChoice, 2021](#)).

Four states target their ESAs for students with special needs: Nevada, Arizona, Florida, and North Carolina. Nevada’s program is open to all students but has not been implemented yet due to legal action regarding the state’s ability to use public school funding toward ESAs. Arizona initially opened its scholarships up for special needs students but since 2017, has expanded eligibility to include students in failing schools and low-income students living on a reservation, with the program facing a cap of 30,000 students ([Beienburg, 2019](#)). Florida initially passed ESA for special needs students and then gradually increased eligibility to include more types of disabilities ([EdChoice, 2021](#)). ESAs provide access to a school that meets the requirements of special needs students and those families stuck in a failing

district. ESA programs, in general, build upon the critical notion that education is not one-size-fits-all ([Beienburg, 2019](#)).

Charter schools serve over 3.3 million students at over 7,500 schools across the United States. Charter schools are public institutions that are exempt from some of the existing regulations that public schools are subject to ([Wolf et al., 2017](#)). Charter schools oversee their own academic structure, school staffing, and school budgets. The growing number of charter schools are located across 44 states and territories, including D.C., Guam, and Puerto Rico, and enroll roughly 6.5 percent of all public-school students—often low-income or middle-income students. Although charter schools have the flexibility to teach and manage differently than public schools, they are 100 percent accountable by law for their student's achievement ([Anderson et al., 2000](#)). One distinguishing characteristic is that charter schools can be closed if not performing well, which reduces the risk of a child ever being stuck in a failing system ([National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2020](#)). Charter school leaders are required to be transparent about the academic and financial performance of the schools and meet strict standards to stay open. This legal accountability, along with that provided by the marketplace, drives the motivation of charter schools to strive for academic excellence. As a result, charter schools have greater flexibility to make the changes necessary to do what works, unlike traditional public-school systems, which face various barriers and restrictions. Since charter schools are public schools, they must admit all students and are not allowed to prevent students from attending ([U.S. Department of Education, n.d.](#)).

Magnet schools are a type of public school that is still part of the local public school system but has a broader attendance boundary and can accept students from a larger geographical area than the public school zone ([Tegeler & Gevarter, 2021](#)). This helps them to enroll a more diverse group of students. Magnet schools, like charter schools, are tuition-free public schools and offer greater flexibility in the curriculum and admissions process. Magnet schools use themed types of teaching like Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). Whatever the theme, such a unique focus acts as a strong draw for students with interests in the same discipline or area of study ([Mordechay & Ayscue, 2018](#)). Magnet schools typically have alternate ways of instruction, like Montessori methods, and the flexibility to teach in a way that meets the needs of their students, thus closing the achievement gap. This alternative instruction teaches life skills that students can utilize well beyond the classroom. Additionally, magnet schools differ from public schools in that they receive extra funding to allow them to spend more per student, pay teachers more, and purchase additional supplies. In 2019, magnet school programs received \$107 million in federal funds to help increase educational opportunities for students ([U.S. Department of Education, 2020](#)). There are currently over 4,300 magnet schools educating 3.5 million students across the country ([Magnet Schools of America, n.d.](#)).

Homeschooling is another option for families seeking education freedom. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the U.S. homeschooling population more than doubled between 1999 and 2016, from 850,000 to 1.69 million children, or 3.3 percent of the K–12 student population ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2016](#)). This form of school

choice is driven by parents looking to be directly involved with providing an educational experience more catered to the specific needs of their children than what their children would receive in a conventional school environment. According to the Education Commission of the States, homeschooling policies have been established in all 50 states. States differ on requirements for assessment and attendance, with some states having no or minimum requirements. Some states allow homeschooled students to participate in public school extracurricular activities during or after school ([Wixom, 2015](#)). The number of children in homeschool increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a Census Bureau survey conducted in April of 2020, about 5.4 percent of families reported homeschooling school-aged children. By the fall of 2020, the survey found 11.1 percent of households were now reporting homeschooling. This 5.6 percentage point increase is doubling what a normal year of reporting for American households looks like ([Eggleston & Fields, 2021](#)). This demonstrates that parents are seeking individual solutions to meet the needs of their children. The Census Bureau study also describes an influx of parental inquiries about “pandemic pods.” These pods were formed for homeschool families to continue teaching in a group setting by keeping small groups of students and sharing the responsibility for teaching among the parents. School choice options and innovations from the pandemic are leading more parents to seek better-aligned programs with the realities of the 21st century ([Eggleston & Fields, 2021](#)).

The variety of school choice options presented above provides context to parents’ current options across the United States. After all, every child learns differently, even within the same family. By contrast, policy at the federal level for decades has tended to maintain a top-down mindset, as evidenced by the publication of [A Nation at Risk](#) published in 1983, [The No Child Left Behind Act](#) of 2001, and [Common Core](#) in 2009. These one-size-fits-all efforts have failed to achieve their lofty ambitions. A more promising path to reforming the education system is to assess programs and innovations currently in place and build upon those demonstrating success. School choice is proving to be that innovation, and it has grown significantly over the last few decades. To date, roughly one out of five students are enrolled in a school of their choice. School choice policies are a particularly ripe area for expansion given their growing evidence of success, the benefits from scaling up to increase accountability on public schools, and the promise of ensuring that every child receives a high-quality education regardless of family income or geography ([Pioneer Institute, 2020](#)).

EVIDENCE OF EDUCATION CHOICE IMPACT

In an America that prizes equal opportunity, zip codes and family income should not determine a child’s future. Based on a well-established and growing body of evidence, there is reason to suggest that expanding the reach and scale of education choice across the Nation can reduce opportunity gaps for vulnerable students and improve the quality of education for children of all backgrounds. The benefits to individuals and society are broadly encompassing, ranging from higher future earnings to lower crime. Some of these improvements are most noticeable in schools that operate outside the confines of the

traditional public school system, where many teachers struggle with large class sizes, few resources, and various limitations on how they can teach students ([Chingos & Whitehurst, 2011](#)). Education choice can help break through these barriers and better equip teachers to utilize the best strategies available to improve student success and inspire excellence. The full promise of education choice, however, comes about from its ability to draw the best out of schools of all stripes—public or private—by empowering parents liberated from local education monopolies to demand greater accountability and responsiveness. The rest of this section documents some of the research into the wide-ranging effects of school choice.

Test Scores

Although the research is mixed regarding the effects of school choice on test scores—particularly in the case of voucher programs, which vary considerably in design—there is a positive relationship between National Assessment of Education Achievement (NAEP) test scores and the degree of educational freedom and school choice in the state ([Wolf et al., 2021](#)). Moreover, most studies of oversubscribed charter schools, where the scarcity of slots allows researchers to compare the educational outcomes between students who get in versus those who do not, find positive effects on test scores ([Epple, Romano & Zimmer, 2016](#)). Another study finds that charter school effectiveness has been increasing over time as successful charter schools expand and poorly performing schools have more students leave the school district ([Baude et al., 2020](#)).

Educational Achievement, Attainment, and Future Earnings

Continuing to measure the test scores of all students is important, but testing does not always capture all the elements that may have impacted these students. High School graduation rates and college enrollment may be better indicators of the long-term effects school choice has on students. According to a study entitled [Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program](#), educational attainment is also positively affected by school choice. This study found that a student who accepted the offer for a Washington, D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) scholarship raised their probability of completing high school by 12 percentage points. The study also discovered that high school graduation rates increased by 21 points for students using a scholarship ([Wolf et al., 2010](#)). Additionally, the study noted that parents had higher satisfaction and rated their chosen schools safer than when their child was in the D.C. Public School System. As a result, the OSP Scholarship program students were less likely to change schools, reporting only 3 percent per year leave the program. In contrast, 20 percent of students leave or change schools in the D.C. Public School System. Elsewhere, a 2019 study by the Urban Institute on the effects of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program found that receipt of the scholarship—the majority of which went to low-income students from low-income schools—increased the likelihood of college enrollment by 12 to 19 percent and the probability of obtaining a bachelor's degree by 10 to 20 percent ([Chingos, Monarrez & Kuehn, 2019](#)). This increased attainment is crucial because it is associated with higher lifetime earnings ([Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011](#)).

Some studies have found direct evidence that students in non-traditional public high schools, such as charter schools, are likely to have more prosperous financial futures. For

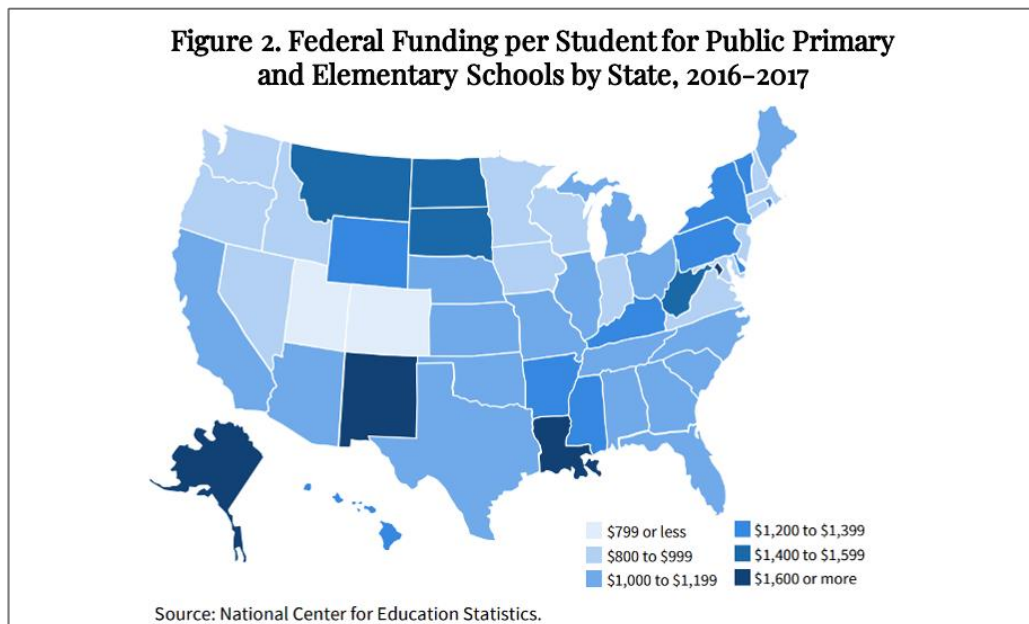
example, one study examined the earnings of students who attended charter high schools and those who attended public high schools in both Florida and Chicago. They found substantial positive effects of charter schools on high school graduation, college entry, and college attainment. Moreover, in the Florida case, researchers were able to link student and workforce data. They found that workers between the ages of 23 and 25 years old who had attended charter schools had increased annual earnings of \$2,347 compared to traditional public school students ([Booker et al., 2014](#)). Notably, they found that charter schools positively impacted future earnings whether or not those students pursue a job or college right after high school.

Cost Savings with Better Long-Term Student Outcomes

School choice also has important cost-saving implications for education finance. State and local governments develop decisions about school funding and standards. The current funding for education is affected by demographic trends in each state and the number of federal dollars a state receives per student. Title I grants, which are included in this federal funding to states, help support low-income children and children with disabilities. In the 2017-2018 school year, \$761 billion was allocated to public K-12 education. The majority of that funding comes directly from state and local governments, while only 8 percent—\$60 billion—of that funding comes from the federal government. Additionally, about 26 percent of that \$60 billion federal funding for K-12 public education was allocated for Title I, and 20 percent of it was designated for students with disabilities. ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2021](#)) ([The White House, 2020](#)).

Figure 2 below provides information on federal funding per student by the state for K-12 education in 2016-2017. The amount each state receives is based on the amount of low-income students and students with disabilities ([The White House, 2020](#)). On average, \$12,612 per student nationwide is spent on K-12 public education, with the lowest at around \$7,628 per child ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2020](#)). These are the dollars that could be in parents' hands to select a school that meets the needs of their children rather than an automatic assignment to a neighborhood school.

Figure 2: Federal Funding per Student for Public Primary and Elementary Schools by State, 2016–2017



Charter schools and voucher programs sometimes receive less funding than public schools. One study found that public charter schools received \$5,828 less funding per student than other public schools across 14 urban areas ([DeAngelis, Wolf, Maloney & May 2018](#)). It also noted a savings of nearly \$3,100 per recipient among 16 voucher programs ([Lueken, 2018](#)). The ability of school choice programs to achieve better or at least comparable academic outcomes at a lower cost suggests the possibility of significant long-run cost savings from the expansion of such as charter schools, voucher programs, and scholarships.

Contrary to concerns, such school choice expansion can even improve the fiscal fortunes of traditional public schools. For example, when Massachusetts lifted caps on new charter schools in school districts, public schools in the same district experienced an increase in funding per pupil and a shift in how they spent the money. Spending shifted from support services to instruction, thus positively affecting test scores. Thus, the evidence suggests that school choice expansion can produce savings for school districts that can be used to improve educational quality at traditional public schools, even if, in some cases, there may be an adjustment period to realize those savings ([Epple, Romano & Zimmer, 2016](#)).

When it comes to the state of school spending, additional data and context are also in order, as it is often stated that more money could fix the broken education system. Unfortunately, parents and teachers are not always aware of the actual cost or spending per student in the K-12 public education system. EdChoice conducted a survey to determine the general understanding of how much money is allotted for public education in the United States. They surveyed members of the general public, parents with school-aged children, and teachers on a series of topics regarding school costs. They found that most Americans believed government spending on education is significantly lower than what was spent per child. Among the general public surveyed, the median estimate was \$5,000 per student,

while parents with school-aged children guessed even lower at roughly \$2,700 ([EdChoice, 2021](#)).

Figure 3 depicts responses from parents with school-aged children who believe that government spending per student is much lower than what is spent. By comparison, **Figure 7** includes what teachers believe the government spends, which is much lower than what the government actually spends.

Figure 3: Americans, especially parents of younger children, believe that government spending per student is much lower than actual expenditures.

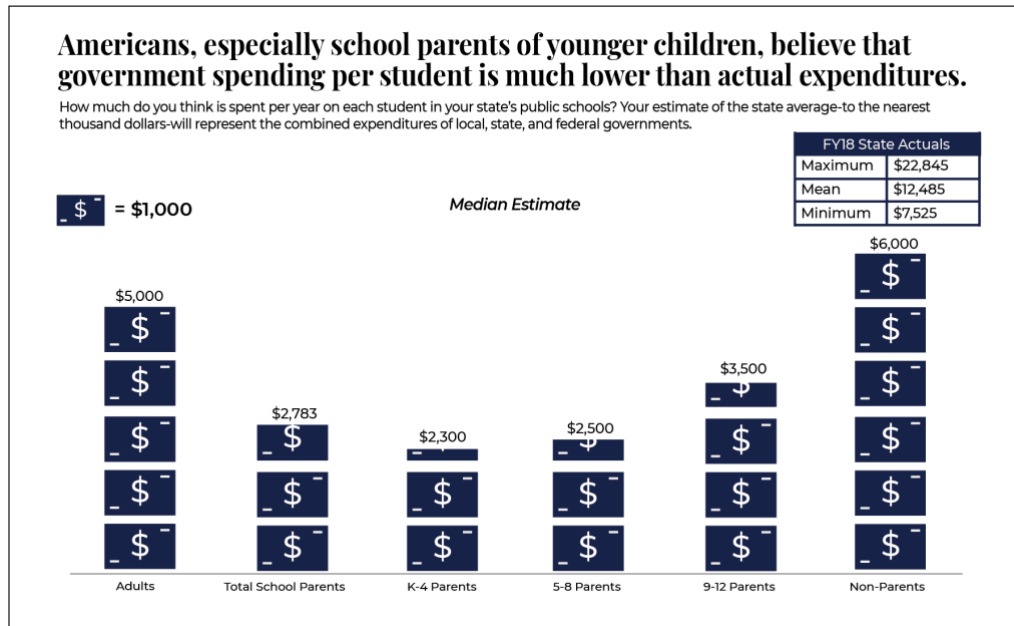
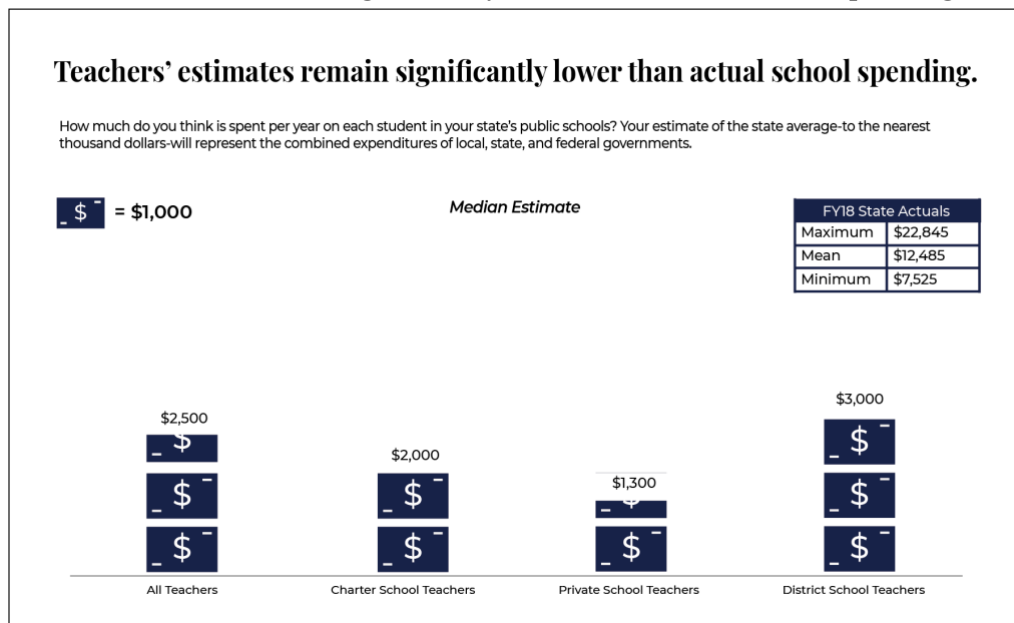


Figure 4: Teachers' estimates remain significantly lower than actual school spending.

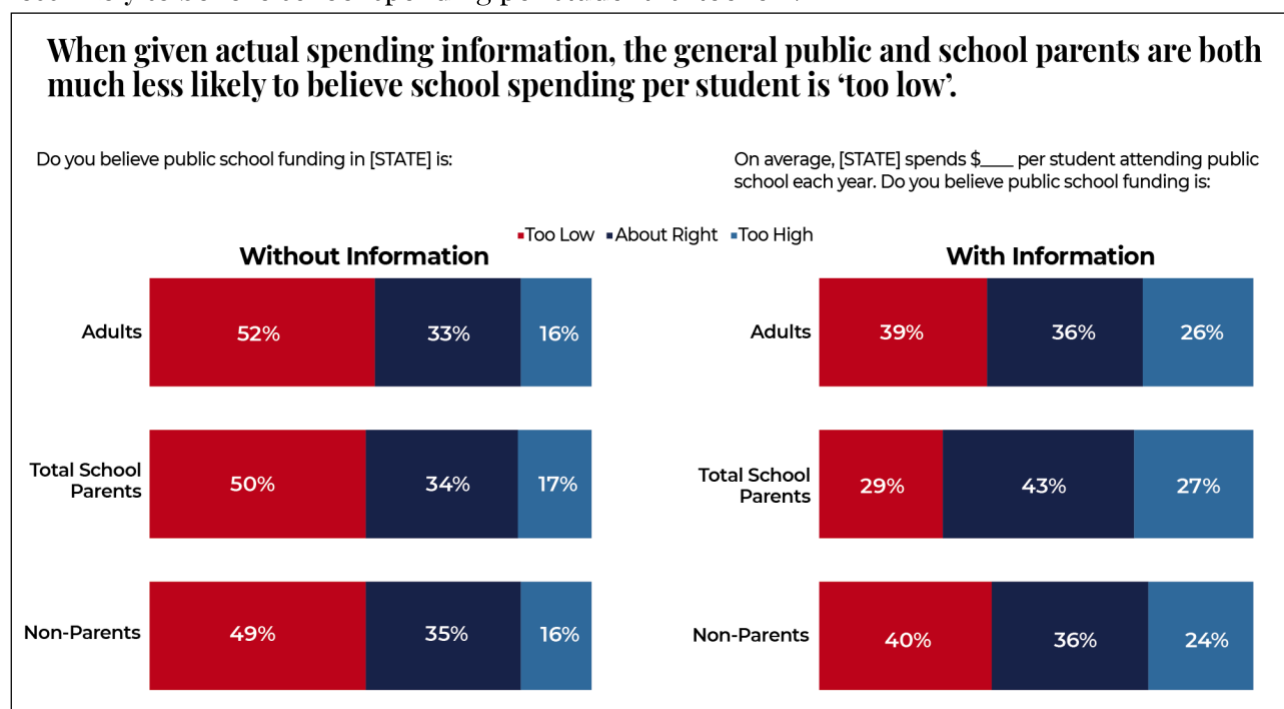


Source: [EdChoice, 2021](#)

It is interesting to note the wide gap of understanding about the actual cost of education. EdChoice inquired further on the subject and asked the general public, parents with school-aged children, and teachers what they thought about the level of school funding, providing some, but not all, with actual data on the amount spent to see if doing so would change their views.

Figure 5 reveals that when the general public and school parent groups were given more information in their polling question vs. given less information (stated below), they found that 52 percent of them thought spending was too low when given less information about state spending per pupil vs. 39 percent who thought spending was too low when given more information about state spending per pupil.

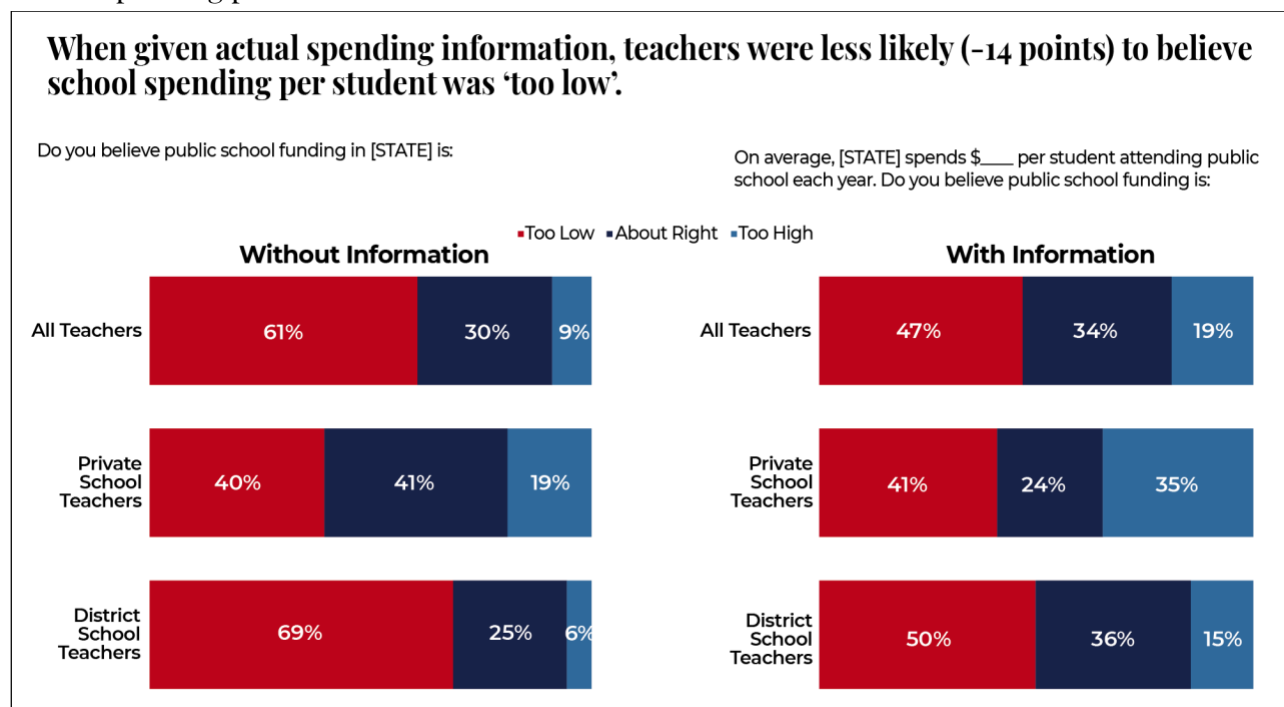
Figure 5: When given actual spending information, the general public and school parents are both much less likely to believe school spending per student is ‘too low.’



Source: [EdChoice, 2021](#)

Figure 6 reveals that when teachers were given more information in their polling question vs. given less information (stated below), they found that 61 percent thought spending was too low when given less information about state spending per pupil vs. only 47 percent who thought spending was too low when given more information about state spending per pupil.

Figure 6: When given actual spending information, teachers were less likely (-14 points) to believe school spending per student is ‘too low.’



Source: [EdChoice, 2021](#)

Figures 5 and 6 above show significant disparities in how much Americans know what is spent on education and how much of their taxpayer dollars are spent per child. The efficiency of education spending by federal, state, and local governments could be vastly improved by expanding the K-12 education choice opportunities, including both public and private schools, for children while simultaneously handing the decision-making over to the parents to choose the best education pathway for their child.

Crime Reduction

The longest existing school choice program in the United States is the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP). A 2020 research study found that low-income students who attended a private school through MPCP were less likely to be convicted of certain crimes or have an out-of-wedlock birth than young adults in comparable public high school students in Milwaukee ([DeAngelis & Wolf, 2020](#)). Specifically, the effects of school choice included a 54 percent reduction in drug convictions, an 86 percent decline in property damage crimes, and a 38 percent reduction in paternity suits for adults age 25-28. MPCP demonstrates how at-risk youth are less likely to be associated with difficult situations in life due to the opportunity they had to attend a private high school chosen by their parents.

A study completed in 2000 in North Carolina evaluated the correlation of crime reduction and school choice by using data from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District (CMS)—the 20th largest school district in the United States ([Deming, 2012](#)). CMS uses a lottery system to select students for school choice. A school choice lottery system is a random selection

process that ensures all applicants have an equal chance of admission. The study investigated whether the opportunity to attend a school other than the one in their zip code reduced criminal activity for disadvantaged youth. The author compared the criminal activity of students who won the lottery and were able to choose their first school of choice to those who lost the lottery and stayed in the zip code assigned school.

Figure 7 depicts the findings showing that high-risk male youth committed about 50 percent less crime due to winning the school choice lottery. Per **Figure 8**, these students were also more likely to remain enrolled in school. These are great successes, suggesting that many more students would benefit by allowing everyone to win the lottery. **Figure 9** depicts the cost savings of a high-risk student attending a school of choice ([Deming, 2012](#)).

Figure 7: When high-risk students attend a school of choice, violent felonies decline.

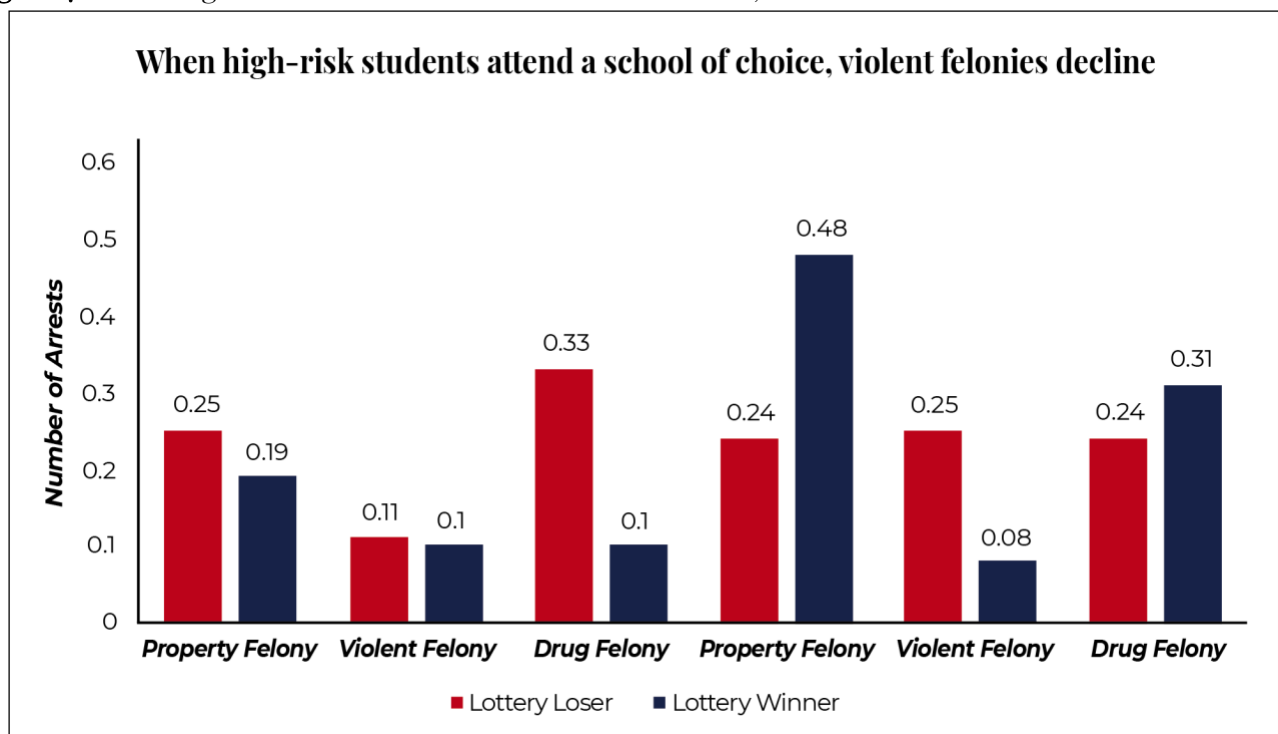


Figure 8: When high-risk students attend a school of choice, less time is spent in jail.

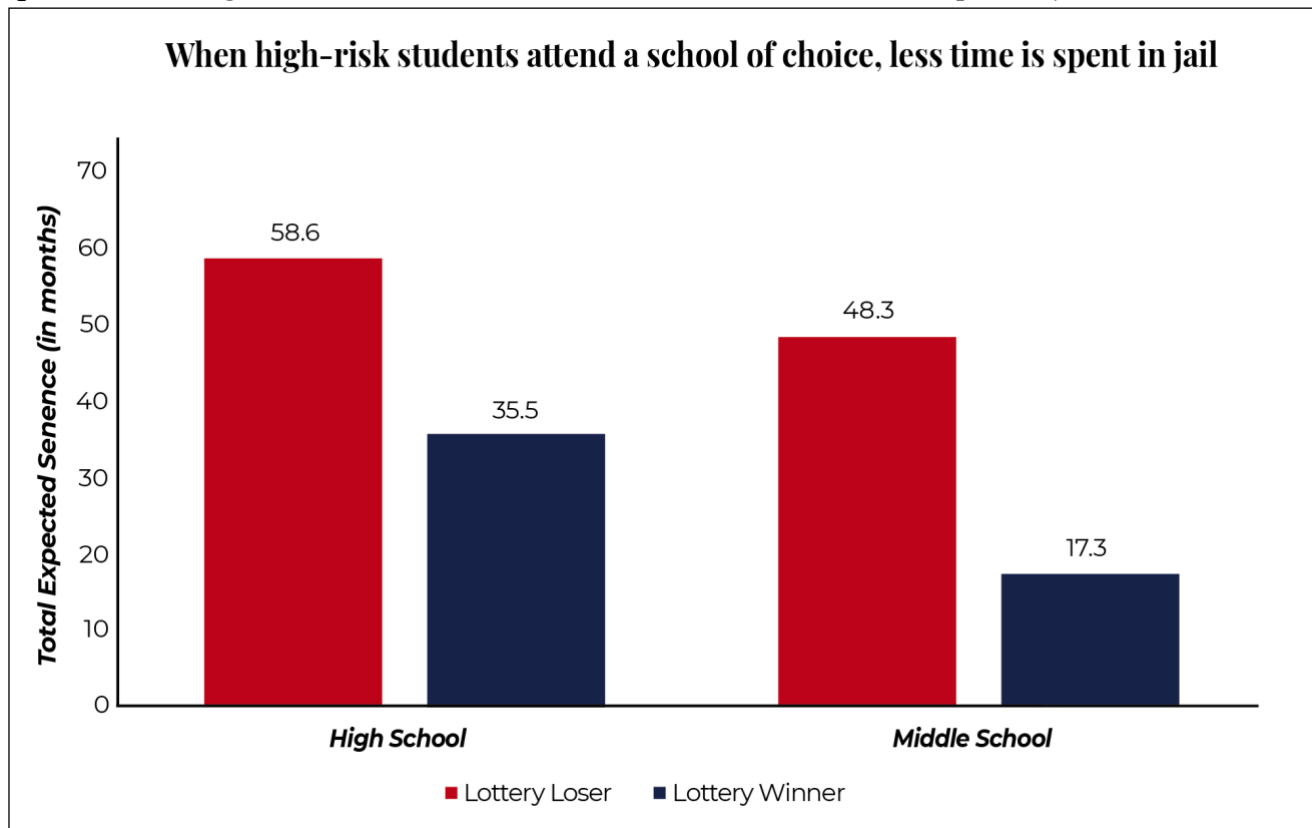
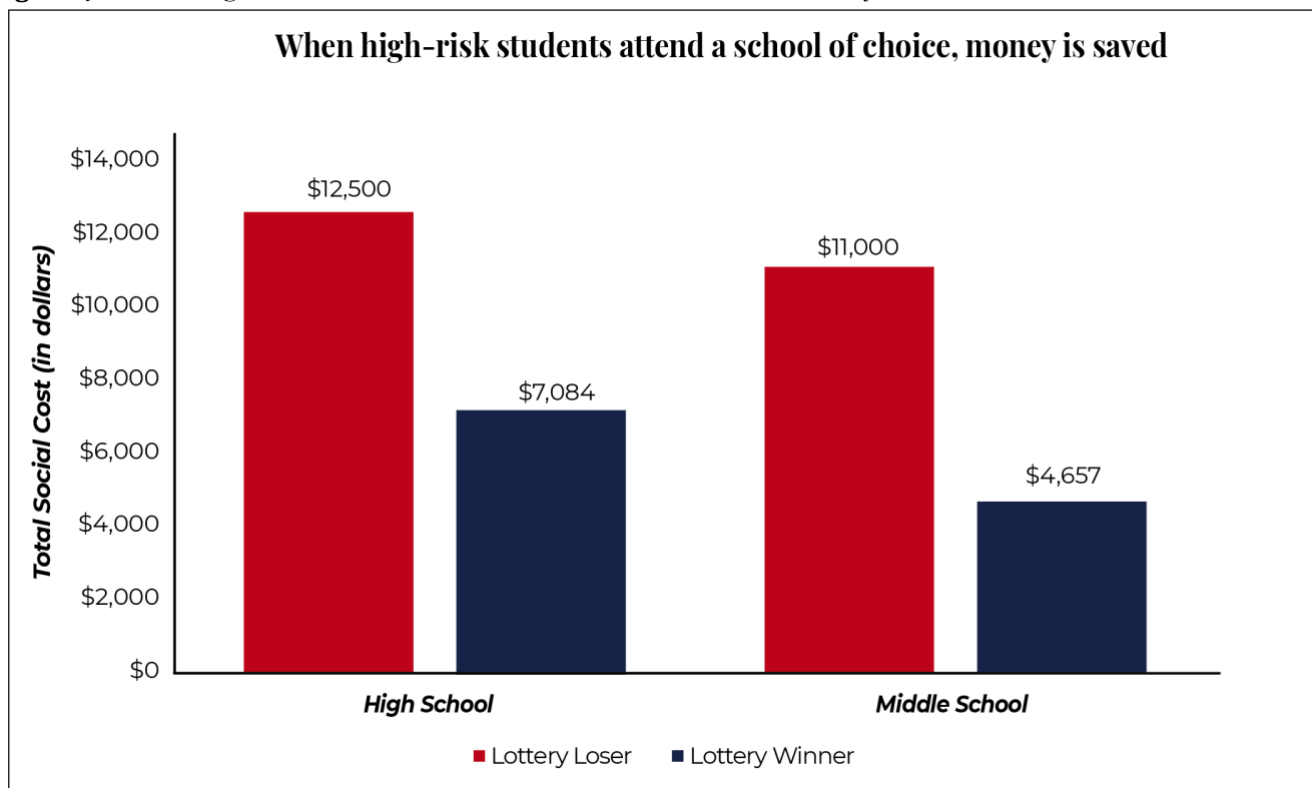


Figure 9: When high-risk students attend a school of choice, money is saved.



According to a 2012 study, only 35 percent of incarcerated individuals have earned a high school diploma, while 82 percent of the United States population have earned one ([Deming, 2012](#)). This study examined the impact that a “lack of good education” had on at-risk individuals as defined by poverty, finding that a quality education had the most considerable effect in crime reduction for black males. Overall, researchers concluded that when at-risk students can choose their educational pathway, violent crimes decline, money is saved, and incarceration rates are lower ([Deming, 2012](#)).

CORONAVIRUS IMPACT

When the coronavirus pandemic shut down our economy, businesses, and schools, individuals worldwide experienced a seismic shift in their work and home life. The majority of public schools in the Nation closed their doors in the Spring of 2020, and districts were forced to redesign operations for 56.4 million students to provide remote instruction. Subsequently, the pandemic exposed even more vulnerabilities within the education system of the United States. Parents, schools, and teachers were caught off guard, and in many cases, unprepared to handle the disruption, particularly regarding the demands of technology needed to support students ([Black, Ferdig, & Thompson, 2021](#)). An April 2020 study by the Census Bureau found that 4.4 million households with students still lacked consistent access to a computer, and 3.7 million households lacked internet access ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2020](#)). For the 2020-2021 school year, over 50 percent of public schools began remotely ([The White House, 2020a](#)), which created vast disruptions in education progress for students, especially in adversely impacted communities. By December 2020, one study found that 60 percent of private school students were receiving in-person instruction, while only 24 percent of traditional public-school students were ([Henderson, Peterson, & West, 2020](#)).

Remote learning and school closures highlighted the importance of education choice and the need to allow parents to determine what is best for their child. According to a June ([2020](#)) McKinsey report, nearly 1.1 million high school students will drop out, and to date, we know that an estimated 3 million students have disengaged from the education system as a result of remote learning ([Korman, O’Keefe & Repka, 2020](#)). Furthermore, the long-term financial implication for students is also detrimental. AFPI calculations estimates, based on Angrist and Krueger ([1991](#)), that school closures can lead to a reduction of \$1,900 to \$2,700 in average lifetime earnings per year.

Significant learning losses may be profound from this past year. One analysis finds that second and third graders are behind in reading by 30 percent than they would be in a normal year ([Domingue, Hough, Lange & Yeatman, 2021](#)). Students’ learning gains in math, as a result of COVID-19 closures, are predicted to be 50 percent less than they would be in a normal, in-person year ([Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020](#)). In the fall of 2020, a New Jersey exam taken by about 90,000 students reported that nearly one in three students would need instructional support. This was just after 3 months of early COVID-19 school closures. It

arguably could be much worse now for New Jersey students and many other students who experienced continued closures ([Rosario, 2021](#)).

Education choice and school closures also have a significant effect on parents and households. In 2019, out of 33.4 million families with children under 18, 91.3 percent of all households—both single and married-couple homes—had at least one employed parent. Among those households, 97.5 percent of married couples with children had at least one employed parent ([U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2020](#)). In August 2020, when many schools continued to remain closed for in-person learning, The White House Council of Economic Advisors calculated that about 5.6 million parents would be unable to return to work if closures perpetuated. School closures disrupted those estimated 5.6 million parents whose ability to work may have led to nearly \$232 billion of collective earning losses ([The White House, 2020](#)). Moreover, these closures had a disproportionate effect on women's workforce participation. From February 2020 to February 2021, a net 2.4 million women left the labor force ([U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2021](#)). In previous recessions, women who dropped out of the workforce to care for their kids often struggled to return, unable to find a job in their previous role or draw the same wage ([Silva and Miranda, 2021](#)). Thus, millions of hardworking American families are affected by school closures and a lack of educational opportunities and choices.

To offset some of those negative impacts of school closures last fall, President Trump signed [Executive Order 13969](#) on Expanding Educational Opportunity Through School Choice, which allowed the Department of Health and Human Services to allocate Community Services Block Grant funds, a total of nearly \$1.7 billion in fiscal year 2020, to scholarships and tuition for parents who wanted to send their child to a school offering in-person learning or more opportunities ([The White House, 2020](#)). Additionally, the [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act](#) and the [Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act](#) allocated a combined total of \$113 billion to education and states, including discretionary spending for governors across the Nation. As school years are coming to an end across the United States, the most recent relief package entitled the [American Rescue Plan Act](#) allocated an additional \$123 billion for K-12 education. By June 7 of 2021, states are required to submit plans for reopening or opening for the first time, learning loss assessments, and pathways to help disadvantaged students. In total, the federal government has provided almost \$190.5 billion in relief funding to schools ([Jordon, 2021](#)). Alabama, for example, is spending over \$100 million of these funds to expand broadband access and provide equipment for all students in the state. Florida is focused on closing the achievement gap through reinforcing literacy support to Florida's low-income and struggling K-5 learners ([National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021](#)).

COVID-19 amplified the importance of school choice. It exposed a system that does not meet the needs of all families. An education system that goes beyond the one-size-fits-all approach provides choice and puts parents in control is the most prudent way to meet the unique educational and social needs of children and their families.

SCHOOL CHOICE IS NOT PRIVATE VS. PUBLIC

School choice is not about pitting schools against each other or abandoning traditional public schools in favor of other options—quite the contrary. School choice can be the tide that lifts all boats by creating greater accountability and responsiveness among school administrators to the needs of students. The deficiency of the current public-school monopoly exposed a sincere lack of accountability and responsiveness to the needs of students and families during the coronavirus pandemic. Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina recently stated, “Locking vulnerable kids out of the classroom is locking adults out of their future” ([Scott, 2021](#)), and there is no reason why this statement should pertain only to the negative impact of school closures. Education choice unleashes opportunities and the future potential of all American children, especially those in underserved communities.

A 2021 study created an *Education Freedom Index (EFI)* for all 50 states plus D.C., which measures the availability and accessibility of private, charter, homeschool, and public-school choices. The researchers found that higher levels of education freedom are significantly associated with higher NAEP student achievement levels across the entire state. In this study, Arizona leads the Nation in overall education freedom ([Wolf et al., 2021](#)). Still, interestingly, a separate study by Stanford University found that Arizona led the Nation in student growth overall and for growth among low-income students ([Stanford University, 2018](#)). One could argue that Arizona’s high-quality education through choice could have a significant, positive effect on low-income students. The state with the least overall freedom was found to be Hawaii because there are no private school options, and they have very restrictive charter school laws. One of the key points found in this study was that public school and school choice interaction seems to be what yields positive academic outcomes ([Wolf et al., 2021](#)).

Often the most common argument against school choice is that it is a detriment to the improvement of district public schools and takes away student funding, as a number of states calculate school funding based on enrollment. Currently, even though school choice programs have increased in many areas of the United States, they are still minimal in size compared to district public schools. As previously stated, the Department of Education predicted that there would be 50 million students enrolled in public schools, with charter, magnet, private, and homeschooled children making up a much smaller number. Even so, the prospect of school choice expansion has nevertheless created some consternation among those who take a zero-sum mindset and view one school’s gain as inherently another’s loss, despite evidence pointing to the contrary. In particular, two studies conducted in 2014 and 2020 found that traditional public-school students benefited from Florida’s Tax Credit Scholarship program expansions. In the 2020 study, public school students who happened to live in areas close to private school options experienced a rise in test scores and a decline in absences and suspensions, as the presence of nearby alternative school options increased the accountability faced by the traditional public school system. These positive effects were considerable for students from low-income families ([Figlio & Hart, 2014](#)) ([Figlio, Hart & Karbownik, 2020](#)). The largest voucher program in Milwaukee mentioned

at the beginning of this report—was studied to see how the expansion of this program affected public schools over time. Researchers found that when the voucher program expanded to private schools, public school students saw an increase in test scores. The study concluded that expanding voucher programs could improve public schools with no adverse effects and that more students enrolled in both private and public schools could benefit from expansion ([Epple, Romano, & Urquiola, 2017](#)).

Furthermore, a study published this year entitled, [Is More School Choice Associated with Higher State-Level Performance on the NAEP?](#) also found that offering more choices in states enhances academic outcomes for students whether they are enrolled in public or private schools. Thus, expanding educational choice creates opportunities across the range of school options—including public schools—by enhancing accountability, especially for underperforming schools. It can strengthen schools that are not meeting the same high-quality education standards as others ([Wolf et al., 2021](#)). The effects of COVID-19 make it clear that there is no one-size-fits-all model to meet the needs of students, especially during a pandemic. The lesson we learned through the last year is that education solutions need to be flexible, and families need to have the ability to make those decisions.

CONCLUSION

AFPI's Center for Education Opportunity believes every parent should be empowered to choose a high-quality education for their children—the gateway to fulfilling the American dream. We must determine how we can ensure that students and parents are never victims to a complex, arguably bureaucratic system, that parents are given the power to choose the best educational opportunity, and that our school systems are responsive to the needs of students.

Zip codes and backgrounds should not determine a child's future. Charter schools, private schools, tax-credit scholarships, education savings accounts, voucher programs, open enrollment, magnet schools, and many other school options are helping to redesign public education with parents at the forefront of the decision-making process. Scaling up choice in education across the Nation can increase competition among providers, reduce opportunity gaps for our more vulnerable students, and improve the quality of education for all children.

An extensive body of research provides supportive evidence that high-quality education through school choice can more reliably put children on a better pathway to success ([Jacobson, 2018](#)). There are several positive effects that school choice research has shown on crime reduction, education attainment and achievement, future earnings, and cost savings for participating students—all factors that contribute to the long-term success of a child. The alternative of limiting students based on where they live or how much money they come from—the status quo in far too many communities—is failing countless families and undermining America's potential.

Federal law does not create a fundamental right to education; however, every state constitution provides some form of public education at the elementary and secondary levels for students. Therefore, state-level action is required to improve education. Where a family can afford to live should not determine the quality of education to which children have access. State and local leadership, along with policymakers, public and private organizations, and schools, are responsible for the advancement and improvement of educational opportunities in their states, but most importantly, parents should be in control of the decision-making process for their families. By working together, the United States can bolster high-quality education, ensure taxpayer dollars are making a direct impact, and create a lasting effect on the next generation of Americans. The United States, more than ever before, has an opportunity to reform its education system to a system of excellence and greatness, but the American family and student must be put first.

Through experience, research, and education, AFPI's Center for Education Opportunity dedicates itself to fostering transformational action so that every child can achieve the American Dream. It is putting the American family and student first by educating parents, states, and local leadership on the importance of expanding educational opportunities and programs, advocating for policies that make tangible reforms to our education system, and creating greater outcomes for America's future.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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