

# PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE

## Myths v. Reality

### 2018

---

*There are many myths and misconceptions about private school choice programs. Despite the rhetoric, parents continue to demand school options and choose these programs to provide high-quality educational opportunities for their children. Today, almost half a million students are enrolled in voucher, tax credit scholarship, and education savings account (ESA) programs nationwide. Below we address some common “myths” about these school choice programs.*

---

#### MYTH #1: Private school choice programs drain money from public schools.

**REALITY:** Private school choice programs save our government millions of dollars each year. When a student attends a non-public school using a voucher, ESA, or tax credit scholarship, state and federal governments usually do not have to pay a public school to provide an education for that student. And the cost to educate a child in a traditional district school is almost always greater than the public funding provided for each child in a school choice program. So it’s no wonder that tax credit scholarship programs, for example, end up saving each participating state anywhere from \$13-\$120 million annually.<sup>i</sup>

#### MYTH #2: Private school choice programs violate the separation between church and state.

**REALITY:** The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that appropriately-designed private school choice programs are fully constitutional.<sup>ii</sup> And numerous state courts have upheld the constitutionality of voucher, tax credit scholarship, and ESA programs.<sup>iii</sup>

#### MYTH #3: Students don’t benefit from private school choice.

**REALITY:** Seventeen empirical studies examined academic outcomes for private school choice participants using random assignment, the “gold standard” of social science. Of these studies, 11 report positive test score effects among their primary findings. Four studies found no significant effects, and two found negative impact in the early years of study.<sup>iv</sup> Private school choice also leads to more students graduating from high school and enrolling in college, as we’ve seen in Milwaukee, New York City, and Florida.<sup>v</sup> In Florida, for example, tax credit scholarship students

are up to 43% more likely to enroll in college than their peers in traditional public schools if they stay in the program four years or more.<sup>vi</sup>

MYTH #4: School choice is anti-public school.

**REALITY:** Public schools are an integral part of American society and, in many cases, they offer a quality education. But when public schools don't work—or don't work for all children—parents deserve a choice, whether that be a magnet school, charter school, private school, virtual school, home school etc. All students can learn, and we believe they should all have the opportunity to do so in a safe and supportive school, chosen by their parents, that meets their individual learning needs.

MYTH #5: There is no accountability in school choice programs.

**REALITY:** All private school choice programs have some level of administrative and financial accountability. And most programs have academic accountability<sup>vii</sup>. Private schools in every state must also comply with health and safety regulations. In most states, a student attending a private school through a school choice program must either take the state assessments or nationally norm-referenced tests that measure learning gains in math and language arts. Importantly, families must opt-in to private school choice programs and have the ability to leave at any time, which adds another layer of accountability for program quality.

MYTH #6: Only Republicans support private school choice.

**REALITY:** School choice has bipartisan support. Scores of Democratic state legislators have sponsored, cosponsored, and voted for the 54 private school choice programs that now exist in 26 states plus D.C. and Puerto Rico. According to a 2018 national poll of likely voters, 72% of Latinos, 61% of whites, 66% of African Americans, 75% of Republicans, 62% of Independents, and 54% of Democrats support school choice.<sup>viii</sup> Eleven Democratic Governors have signed school choice bills or allowed them to become law, and Democratic U.S. Senators Diane Feinstein and Cory Booker also have a strong history of championing private school choice.<sup>ix</sup> different choices for youngsters so you can see where they learn best and then enable them to be in that situation."<sup>x</sup>

MYTH #7: Private schools discriminate against students and teachers.

**REALITY:** Schools participating in choice programs must comply with federal laws prohibiting discrimination based on race, color, or national origin. Some states have adopted even stricter non-discrimination language for their private choice programs.

MYTH #8: School choice hurts traditional public schools.

**REALITY:** Studies consistently demonstrate that public schools benefit from the existence of voucher and scholarship tax credit programs. Twenty-one empirical studies examine private school choice programs' impact on academic outcomes for nonparticipating students in nearby public schools. Of those studies, 20 found that private school choice improved the performance of nearby public schools; one found no significant effects of this competition.<sup>xi</sup>

MYTH #9: Only private schools have selective admissions policies.

**REALITY:** Public schools across the country – including magnet schools, specialty schools, charter schools, and international baccalaureate schools – have selective admissions policies and requirements for enrollment. Furthermore, if we are going to allow our country's education system to serve all students, we need to let some schools create specific enrollment criteria for the students they're best suited to serve. Every school doesn't need to meet the needs of all students – but each student must have a school that meets their needs.

MYTH #10: Private choice programs increase racial segregation in schools.

**REALITY:** No reputable study shows that private school choice increases racial segregation. In fact, of the 10 studies using valid empirical methods to examine school choice and racial segregation, nine found that school choice creates more racially integrated classrooms; one found no significant effect on integration.<sup>xii</sup> And a 2016 analysis found that the Louisiana Scholarship Program aides desegregation efforts in Louisiana.<sup>xiii</sup> Moreover, most school choice advocates believe in the power of diverse schools and celebrate the fact that private school choice programs give kids from different socioeconomic backgrounds the opportunity to learn and collaborate together.

MYTH #11: School choice only helps urban students.

**REALITY:** Public and private school choice, including online education and course choice, are critically important to increasing education options for rural and suburban students. Students outside of major urban districts face real challenges due to population sparsity and school size, limiting many families' high-quality educational options. More rural and suburban policymakers are embracing school choice as a way to bring new and better opportunities to their constituents.

MYTH #12: Private schools don't serve students with special needs.

**REALITY:** Twenty school choice programs across the United States exist specifically to serve students with special needs. Education savings accounts (ESAs), which allow families to tailor schooling options beyond tuition—for example, with specialized therapy or tutoring—represent the next wave of school choice and can be particularly helpful for students with special needs who require customized learning opportunities.<sup>xiv</sup> Each year, over 70,000 students with special needs use ESAs and other private choice programs to meet their learning needs.

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/MXwIRcYXqhWbzcbs3te/full>

<sup>ii</sup> *Arizona Christian School Tuition Organization v. Winn*, 563 U.S. 125 (2011); *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 536 U.S. 639 (2002)

<sup>iii</sup> [https://ij.org/pillar/school-choice/?post\\_type=case](https://ij.org/pillar/school-choice/?post_type=case)

<sup>iv</sup> [www.uaedreform.org/private-school-choice-meta-analysis-of-experimental-test-score-effects/](http://www.uaedreform.org/private-school-choice-meta-analysis-of-experimental-test-score-effects/)

<sup>v</sup> [www.urban.org/research/publication/effects-statewide-private-school-choice-college-enrollment-and-graduation](http://www.urban.org/research/publication/effects-statewide-private-school-choice-college-enrollment-and-graduation); [https://sites.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/PEPG15\\_01\\_Chingos\\_Peterson.pdf](https://sites.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/PEPG15_01_Chingos_Peterson.pdf);

[www.urban.org/research/publication/do-voucher-students-attain-higher-levels-education](http://www.urban.org/research/publication/do-voucher-students-attain-higher-levels-education)

<sup>vi</sup> [www.urban.org/research/publication/effects-statewide-private-school-choice-college-enrollment-and-graduation](http://www.urban.org/research/publication/effects-statewide-private-school-choice-college-enrollment-and-graduation)

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.federationforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/AFC-2016-17-Yearbook-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>viii</sup> [www.federationforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/SC-Polling-Sheet-9-1241.pdf](http://www.federationforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/SC-Polling-Sheet-9-1241.pdf)

<sup>ix</sup> Napolitano (AZ: 2006, 2007, 2008), Vilsack (IA: 2006), Culver (IA: 2007, 2009), Bullock (MT: 2015), Perdue (NC: 2011), Henry (OK: 2010), Rendell (PA: 2006, 2007, 2008), McAuliffe (VA: 2014), Doyle (WI: 2006), Wolf (PA: 2018), and Cooper (NC: 2018)

<sup>x</sup> U.S. Senate Floor Debate, March 22, 2010

<sup>xi</sup> [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0161956X.2016.1207436](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0161956X.2016.1207436)

<sup>xii</sup> [www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/A-Win-Win-Solution-The-Empirical-Evidence-on-School-Choice.pdf#page=30](http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/A-Win-Win-Solution-The-Empirical-Evidence-on-School-Choice.pdf#page=30)

<sup>xiii</sup> [www.uaedreform.org/downloads/2016/03/report-3-the-impact-of-the-louisiana-scholarship-program-on-racial-segregation-in-louisiana-schools-2.pdf](http://www.uaedreform.org/downloads/2016/03/report-3-the-impact-of-the-louisiana-scholarship-program-on-racial-segregation-in-louisiana-schools-2.pdf)

<sup>xiv</sup> [www.edchoice.org/resource-hub/school-choice-faqs/](http://www.edchoice.org/resource-hub/school-choice-faqs/)