



# Expanding High-Quality Educational Options for All Students

*How States Can Create a System of Schools Worth Choosing*

By Linda Darling-Hammond, Robert Rothman, and Peter W. Cookson, Jr.

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# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>What Kinds of Educational Choices Exist in the U.S.?</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Providing Choice Options Within Public School Districts</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Open Enrollment: Intradistrict and Interdistrict Choice .....	4
Magnet Schools .....	5
Schools Based on Distinct Educational Models .....	7
Dual Enrollment/Early College .....	8
<b>Providing Choice Options Through Charter Schools</b> .....	<b>10</b>
Description of Charters.....	10
Charter Outcomes.....	11
Policies Addressing Charter Challenges .....	13
<b>Public Funding to Attend Private Schools</b> .....	<b>15</b>
Voucher Programs.....	15
Tax Credits or Deductions.....	16
Education Savings Accounts .....	17
<b>Homeschooling</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>Key Policy Considerations</b> .....	<b>21</b>
High-Quality Neighborhood Schools .....	21
Intradistrict and Interdistrict Choice Options.....	21
Dual Enrollment and Early College Options .....	22
Charter Schools .....	22
Virtual Schools .....	23
Private School Options .....	23
Homeschooling .....	23
Research .....	24
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>Endnotes</b> .....	<b>25</b>
<b>About the Authors</b> .....	<b>31</b>

## Executive Summary

This report examines current educational options for U.S. students and the challenges of ensuring that choices are equally available and offer high-quality education. The report suggests what state policymakers can do to create high-quality opportunities that offer each family a system of schools worth choosing.

The analysis starts from the assumption that school choice policy is a means to an end and not an end itself. The goals of our education system include improving student learning opportunities, strengthening educational attainment, providing alternatives that fit student needs, and integrating our diverse citizenry, while preparing young people for their civic roles in a democracy. As we present information about the range of choices available to families within the public and private sectors, we also indicate where research has found that various approaches influence these desired outcomes of education in a democratic society.

### What School Choices Are Available?

U.S. students and their families have many educational choices available to them, and the range of options has increased over the past two decades. Although we often associate the term “choice” with privately governed charter schools or private school voucher proposals, the vast majority of schools of choice are operated by public school districts (see Table 1). Since the 1960s, districts have sponsored alternatives such as magnets and other innovative schools.

In 2012, 37.3% of parents of students in grades 1–12 indicated that public school choice was available to them. More than three fourths of all parents said their child’s current school was their first choice, including 77.5% of parents of students who were placed in their district-assigned schools. About 19% of parents with children in public schools said they had moved to their neighborhood to attend its schools.

About 6.5 million (15.4%) of all public school students enrolled in a school of their choice other than their assigned school. Magnet schools enrolled 2.6 million students and charter schools a similar number (2.7 million). A wide range of other schools of choice—theme schools, career academies, and open-enrollment options—accounted for the remaining 1.2 million students.

Private schools enroll about 9% of all students and, as shown in Table 1, a number of states offer financial subsidies for parents who send their children to private schools, including education vouchers, education savings accounts, and tax credits or deductions for private school costs.



**Table 1**  
**Public and Private School Choice Options**

	Type of Choice	Number of States	Number of Schools	Number of Students
<b>Public Options</b>	Public school students with choice options*	22 intradistrict 25 interdistrict	N/A	18.7 million
	District-run schools of choice*	At least 22	N/A	6.5 million
	Magnet schools**	N/A	3,285	2.6 million
	Postsecondary options***	N/A	15,000 high schools	1.3 million
	Charter schools**	44 plus DC	6,747	2.7 million
<b>Private Options</b>	Private schools+	50 plus DC	34,576	4.9 million
	Vouchers for private schools++	14 plus DC	N/A	179,000
	Tax credits or deductions++	8	N/A	880,000
	Education savings accounts++	6	N/A	11,500
	Homeschooling+++	50 plus DC	N/A	1.7 million

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\*\*\* National Center for Education Statistics. (February 2013). *Dual Enrollment Programs for High School Students at Postsecondary Institutions, 2010–11*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

+ National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). *2015–16 Private School Universe Survey*. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017073.pdf>.

++ EdChoice. (2017). Fast Facts. <http://www.edchoice.org/our-resources/fast-facts>. Participation rates as of 7/6/17 at <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/school-choice-in-america/#map-overlay>.

+++ National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Homeschooling in the United States: 2012*. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016096rev.pdf>.

## How Can Policymakers Strengthen School Choices?

Expansions of choice have produced many positive opportunities for children, but evidence shows that simply providing choices does not automatically provide high-quality options that are accessible to all students or improve student learning. Here are some considerations for policymakers as they seek to expand high-quality education options within the public sector.

### High-Quality Neighborhood Schools

Data show that when parents have choice options available, three quarters still choose their assigned school as their first choice. And when parents want to choose a different school, they often cite distance as a challenge. Districts cite transportation costs as an issue for choice plans that bus many children across large distances. Some districts have inadvertently created “educational deserts” as they have allowed schools of choice to locate and choose students without regard to

serving all neighborhoods. If the first, most desired option for most families is a neighborhood public school, planning for options should consider how to create high-quality options in all communities. To support this choice, policymakers can

- attend to community needs in planning for new schools and existing schools; and
- create processes for assessing and improving quality for schools that may be lagging, from school quality reviews that diagnose needs to investments in leadership and staffing, professional development, curriculum, and community school models that provide wraparound health and social services where students need them.

### ***Intradistrict and Interdistrict Choice Options***

Intradistrict and interdistrict choice plans have focused both on supporting desegregation and on creating innovative and distinctive school models—including magnet schools, themed schools (e.g., arts, law, health professions), language immersion schools, and innovative school models. Some of these models, such as Montessori schools, New Tech High Schools, Big Picture schools, and others, have created networks that extend across district and state lines.

Studies have found that many of these strategies have improved student achievement, and some have successfully increased school integration, but the outcomes depend on how well districts work to manage choice and to leverage strong school quality. In addition, as many school districts have become more segregated, interdistrict choice plans have often become more successful for desegregation. These choice strategies can expand high-quality options and serve the public purposes of education when

- districts work to ensure that many high-quality choices are available, and continually seek to improve schools so that no students are left in low-quality options;
- strong systems of information are readily available to parents;
- application processes are consolidated, not burdensome, and are equally accessible;
- choice is managed to support racial/ethnic and economic integration, both within and across district lines; and
- transportation is free and readily available.

### ***Dual Enrollment and Early College Options***

The rapidly growing practice of dual enrollment allows high school students to choose to take courses at the college level, either at a high school or college campus. More than 80% of high schools now offer these options. In addition, more than 200 Early College high schools across the country have created partnerships with colleges, enabling all of their students to earn as much as 2 years of credit toward a bachelor's degree by the time they graduate from high school. Students in these schools are more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and complete college than comparison students.

States can expand and improve course-taking options for high school students, and improve the efficiency of their educational systems, by

- encouraging community colleges and 4-year colleges to partner with local high schools, as well as to offer distance learning courses to expand offerings to secondary students who are ready for more advanced learning opportunities;

- underwriting the costs of dual enrollment in college courses while students are still in high school;
- stimulating the creation of Early College programs through competitive grants or availability of seed money; and
- ensuring that all students have access to the prerequisite coursework in middle and high school.

### **Charter Schools**

Charter schools have expanded rapidly in recent years, with significant investments from the federal government and foundations. Some very successful initiatives exist, yet results overall are mixed. State regulation of charters varies considerably and is associated with very different charter outcomes from state to state. Studies have found that outcomes are stronger where there are fewer authorizers under more stringent oversight, and where expectations for qualified staff, well-defined curriculum, and financial viability are enforced. In addition, charters overall serve fewer special education students and English language learners, and some have been found to exclude high-need students through the admissions process or through later expulsion or counseling out. Some states now also regulate equitable admissions and retention of students.

States and districts can improve the odds that charter schools will provide high-quality options to all students by:

- Having a small number of **authorizers** who are held to strong accountability standards. Typically, these are local education agencies and/or the state education agency operating under expectations that they will enforce state standards and monitor charter school practices and performance.
- Ensuring that charters must meet **standards for quality** pertaining to curriculum, instruction, and assessment; hiring qualified teachers; and requiring financial viability to be authorized or renewed. Some states also look for high levels of community and public support and demonstrations that the school has feasible plans for attaining high levels of achievement for students.
- Ensuring **access** by requiring student recruitment and retention plans, and monitoring access to and continuation in schools for students with disabilities, English learners, and students of varied racial/ethnic, economic, and educational backgrounds.
- Using a regular **reporting and review system** to ensure a reasonable standard of quality. For example, Connecticut requires an annual report on the condition of the school, including the educational progress of students, financial condition, a certified audit statement of all revenues and expenditures, accomplishment of the mission of the charter school, the racial and ethnic composition of the student body and efforts taken to increase that diversity, and best practices employed by the school that contribute significantly to the academic success of students.
- Prohibiting or placing clear restrictions and standards on **for-profit schools** to keep taxpayer funds for public purposes and to remove incentives for schools or educational management organizations to make a profit by restricting student services or denying access to children who are expensive to educate.



## Virtual Schools

Online or virtual schools, the largest of which are for-profit charters, have also been growing rapidly. A recent CREDO study found that virtual charters had far lower achievement for their students in both mathematics and reading than traditional public schools serving similar students. The differences in student learning equated to a student losing half a year of learning in reading and a full year of learning in mathematics. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data also show that 87% of virtual schools were identified as low-graduation-rate schools in 2013–14, with an average graduation rate of only 40%, less than half the national average rate of 82%. States differ as to whether they allow online or for-profit charters; some states prohibit them, while others have authorized many.

States that choose to authorize virtual or online schools can reduce the negative outcomes that have been recorded for this school sector and enhance the chances that these schools will provide productive options for students by

- maintaining **additional special oversight** for the operations of virtual/online schools, if they are authorized, so that students receive adequate support and services from a sufficient number of qualified staff with technology tools fully in place.

Of the 24 states that define or permit virtual charter schools, 20 include additional oversight for these schools. Since 2015, more than 20 state legislatures have introduced bills to strengthen review and accountability over the quality of courses, teachers, and student supports, as well as to protect the privacy of student data and limit profit-making and misreporting of student enrollment and attendance.

## Private School Options

Fourteen states provide public funding for vouchers for students to attend private schools. Education tax credits, deductions, or education savings accounts have also been created in a few states to offset education costs, ranging from private school tuition to AP courses to college savings. Some of these programs are aimed at parents of students with disabilities. In 11 states, voucher programs are also aimed at students with disabilities. Other states limit vouchers to students from low-income families, students who had previously attended a public school, or students from certain geographical areas. States differ substantially in what they require of participating schools in terms of accreditation, accountability, or staff qualifications.

For many years, studies reported little difference in achievement for students using vouchers, with relatively small positive and negative results. Recently, however, several studies of large statewide programs in Indiana, Louisiana, and Washington, DC, found substantial negative effects on achievement for voucher students attending private schools compared to similar students in public schools. One of the studies from Louisiana found that one third of participating private schools had previously experienced enrollment declines, suggesting these schools may have been struggling before the voucher program and indicating the need to consider the quality of schools allowed to participate in such programs.

To support student outcomes, appropriate uses of public funds, and democratic goals, states can consider

- maintaining **standards of quality** for schools that are the recipients of these funds, through requirements for accreditation, staff qualifications, and curriculum plans, as well as information from assessments of student progress;
- ensuring **nondiscrimination standards** on the basis of race, class, gender and sexual orientation, and disability status for schools that are recipients of funds to protect civil rights of students and to discourage segregation or discrimination; and
- funding options that **advance state purposes**, like the provision of more specialized high-quality services to students with disabilities, as some programs are designed to do, or the provision of opportunities for advanced study (such as AP courses) otherwise unavailable to students.

## Homeschooling

All 50 states allow homeschooling. In general, states' concerns have to do with ensuring that all students are receiving an education that will allow them to fully participate in the economy and civic life, and that no students are failing to attend school due to neglect rather than parent engagement in their education. Some homeschooled students, especially those from more affluent homes, appear to achieve well, but the range of performance is extremely wide, and homeschooled students appear to be underrepresented in the college-going population. Research suggests that states can encourage responsible practice by

- requiring **registration or application** for homeschooling intentions, so that students not enrolled in school are expected to be under educational care;
- requiring **evidence of a structured program of study** that covers key aspects of curriculum, minimal qualifications from instructors, and some form of regular assessment of learning; and
- providing financial **support for districts that include homeschooled students** in aspects of the curriculum, students' services, or extracurricular activities.

## Research

Sorting out how to provide students with excellent and equitable educational opportunities is no small feat in the complex world of education. States can better inform their efforts by

- using **high-quality research** that includes appropriate sampling strategies, comparison groups, and controls wherever possible when designing new policies to expand student learning opportunities and to advance other desirable goals such as desegregation; and
- including **research and evaluation requirements** in new policy initiatives and attending to the outcomes of research in reviewing and revising existing policies to better meet states' goals for high-quality education and equitable access.

## Introduction

For many years, states and the federal government have been creating a range of schooling options for students, and the focus of the new administration on expanding choice is likely to accelerate this trend. This brief examines the status of current educational options for U.S. students and what state policymakers can do to create high-quality opportunities that offer each family a system of schools worth choosing.

“Choice” is a core American value that, along with freedom, defines a major part of our national value system. All of us want good choices in every aspect of our lives, including the schools we choose for our children. And our rhetorical commitment to equity should mean that we want good choices for other people’s children as well. Evidence demonstrates that there are some excellent charter schools and private schools in the country, as well as a much larger number of district-run schools of choice in which children thrive.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, given the inequalities in family circumstances, school funding, and access to quality teaching, choice can also raise some knotty and profound issues. What happens when choice initiatives create schools that are not worth choosing—or may even harm some students? Or when schools of choice will not “choose” students who are not sufficiently high-achieving, well supported at home, or otherwise viewed as a “fit” for the school? What are the implications for society and for families when public schools are allowed to exclude students who struggle to learn? Or when choice systems exacerbate racial and economic segregation? Can we design schools of choice that serve the broad purposes of public education?

Those purposes of public education—to prepare an educated citizenry for participation in democratic life and the nation’s economy—require that schools provide equal access and opportunity to learn. Because we are a nation of immigrants, with many cultures and backgrounds, public schools have also had the mission of serving as an integrating force, to create common ground for all to live together productively.

In this report, we examine the role that state policy can play in creating a system of schools that serves these purposes—schools that are universally worth choosing and in which all students are chosen by good schools. We start from the assumption that school choice policy is a means to an end and not an end itself. The goals of our education system include improving student learning opportunities, strengthening educational attainment, providing alternatives that fit student needs, and integrating our diverse citizenry, all while preparing young people for their civic roles in a democracy.

As we present information about the range of choices available to families within the public and private sectors, we also indicate where research has found that various approaches influence these desired outcomes of education in a democratic society. We note that there are challenges in conducting and interpreting research on choice options that policymakers should be aware of as they seek to understand the effects of options on critical goals and as they shape policies that will achieve social goals for strong education for all children (see box on p. 20).

## What Kinds of Educational Choices Exist in the U.S.?

U.S. students and their families have many educational choices available to them, and the range of options has increased over the past two decades. Private schools have been a traditional alternative to public school education, historically serving about 10% of U.S. children. Currently, private schools serve approximately 4.9 million students, or 9% of children in grades k–12.<sup>2</sup> This represents a decrease since 1999, when more than 11% of students were in private schools. A small share of private school students receives publicly funded vouchers: 179,000, far less than 1% of all students.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1**  
**Public and Private School Choice Options**

	Type of Choice	Number of States	Number of Schools	Number of Students
<b>Public Options</b>	Public school students with choice options*	22 intradistrict 25 interdistrict	N/A	18.7 million
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+++ National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Homeschooling in the United States: 2012*. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016096rev.pdf>.

According to NCES, most schools of choice are operated within the public sector (see Table 1).<sup>4</sup> Although we often associate the term “choice” with privately governed charter schools or private school voucher proposals, the vast majority of schools of choice are operated by public school districts. Since the 1960s, districts have sponsored alternatives such as magnets, themed schools

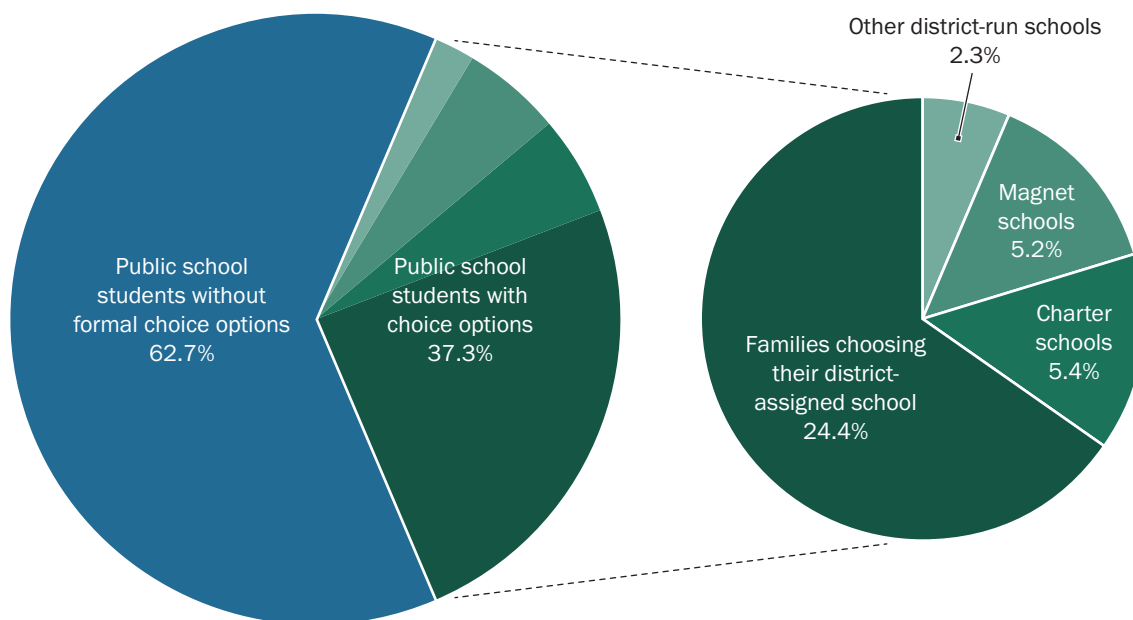
(e.g., arts, law, health professions), language immersion schools, and networks of innovative school models, such as the Internationals Network for Public Schools, New Tech High Schools, Boston’s Pilot Schools, and California’s Linked Learning Academies.

As shown in Figure 1, in 2012, 37.3% of parents of students in grades 1–12—including three quarters of those who remained in their district-assigned school by choice—indicated that public school choice was available to them. More than three fourths of all parents said their child’s school was their first choice, including 77.5% of parents of students who were placed in their district-assigned schools.<sup>5</sup> About 19% of parents with children in public schools said they had moved to their neighborhood to attend its schools.<sup>6</sup> This connects school choice with residential choice, by which parents with adequate means choose where they will live based on the quality of the neighborhood schools.<sup>7</sup>

About 6.5 million (15.4%) of all public school students enrolled in a school of their choice other than their assigned school.<sup>8</sup> Magnet school enrollments accounted for about 40% of this number (2.6 million students), and a wide range of other schools of choice—theme schools, career academies, open-enrollment options—accounted for the remainder.<sup>9</sup> About 2.7 million (5% of all students) chose charter schools, which are publicly funded but are generally privately operated.<sup>10</sup> Most are run as nonprofit organizations with private governing boards; some are operated by public school districts and are under the aegis of the public school board. A small share (about 13% of all charter schools) are operated as private for-profit corporations.

**Figure 1**  
**Public School Choices, 2013–14**

*Percentage of students*



Sources: National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Digest of education statistics: 2015*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/ch\\_2.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/ch_2.asp); National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). *Digest of education statistics: 2016*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/\\_216.20.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/_216.20.asp).



## Providing Choice Options Within Public School Districts

Some states have pioneered a variety of ways to provide choice for their students, with a number of goals in mind, ranging from greater equalization of opportunity and desegregation to options in educational philosophies and broader opportunities for particular advanced studies.

### Open Enrollment: Intradistrict and Interdistrict Choice

The most popular form of school choice is open enrollment, which enables students to attend any public school in a district or state, regardless of residence. Currently, 22 states allow students to attend a non-assigned school within their district (intradistrict choice), and 25 states allow students to attend schools outside of their neighborhood district (interdistrict choice).<sup>11</sup> A majority of those states allow both forms of choice, and some additional states have permissive laws allowing districts to engage at their discretion in intradistrict or interdistrict choice.

**Intradistrict choice.** Many districts—such as New York City; San Francisco, CA; Minneapolis, MN; Montclair, NJ; and Boston, Cambridge, and Lynn, MA—have pioneered choice systems in which all parents choose schools, most of which are district-run, while students also have preferential access to a neighborhood school.

The earliest of these initiatives was launched in the 1970s as part of efforts to create new schools or redesign existing schools in order to personalize learning and offer engaging curricula. Other districts emulated these initiatives in the subsequent decades. These innovative schools were offered as choices, and eventually evolved into systems of universal choice in some cities. In other cities, choice was initiated primarily as part of desegregation efforts. In many cases, cities sought to pursue innovation and integration simultaneously, using approaches called Controlled Choice plans, with the choice process centrally managed to support racial and economic integration, as the district works to continually improve all the schools in the system.

Some of these efforts have been documented as having produced strong results for student achievement and attainment.<sup>12</sup> These results are typically attributed to new designs created by the schools of choice to personalize instruction for students. These have often featured smaller school sizes and new structures, such as advisory systems, that allow longer, stronger relationships among adults and students, as well as engaging pedagogies, such as project-based learning, with strong support systems.

Intradistrict choice became a feature of federal law in 2001 with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act. Under that law, schools that failed to make adequate yearly progress on state tests for 2 years in a row were required to provide their students the option of transferring to a higher performing school within the same district. However, only about 1% of eligible students—approximately 38,000—took advantage of that option.<sup>13</sup>

In many cases, cities sought to pursue innovation and integration simultaneously, using approaches called Controlled Choice plans, with the choice process centrally managed to support racial and economic integration, as the district works to continually improve all the schools in the system.

**Interdistrict choice.** States have also adopted policies allowing students to transfer to schools outside of their districts. In such programs, per-pupil funding usually follows the student from the sending district to the receiving district. However, most states have restrictions on both sending and receiving districts. For example, some programs only allow transfers if they enhance desegregation. In some cases, districts can opt out from receiving students if they lack space for new students. States also allow or require districts to give priority to certain students, such as siblings of enrolled students, children of teachers in the district, or students moving from low-performing schools. Districts can bar transfers if they interfere with desegregation remedies. In Texas, districts must conduct a lottery if more students apply than space allows.

A study of open-enrollment plans in Colorado and Minnesota found that they can be quite popular. In Colorado, 51,000 students, or 6% of total enrollment, enrolled in a nonresident district that year.<sup>14</sup> In Minnesota, 38,000 students, or 5% of total enrollment, enrolled in a nonresident district in 2006–07. That was more than the number of students enrolled in charter schools in Minnesota that year. About one third of Minnesota parents' decisions were found to be segregative, while others enhanced integration or maintained existing balances.<sup>15</sup>

Some interdistrict open-enrollment plans are specifically aimed at promoting desegregation. Interdistrict approaches are important for this purpose because more than 80% of racial/ethnic segregation in U.S. public schools occurs between rather than within school districts,<sup>16</sup> and income groups are also increasingly geographically divided.<sup>17</sup>

For example, since the 1960s, Massachusetts has operated a grant program, known as the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO), that allows students from Boston and Springfield, who are primarily students of color, to transfer to suburban districts. Minnesota has operated a choice program that emphasizes similar goals but is not limited to students of color. Students can transfer from Minneapolis to outlying suburbs or from suburbs to magnet schools in the city. An evaluation of this program found positive achievement outcomes for both groups of students compared to similar students who did not participate.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the Massachusetts and Minnesota programs, at least six other metropolitan areas have established interdistrict school choice desegregation plans through legislation or as a result of a court order. A recent review of research on these programs found that they not only decrease segregation, they also help close racial achievement gaps, while improving racial attitudes, especially among Whites, and leading to long-term mobility and further education for the students of color who participate.<sup>19</sup>

## **Magnet Schools**

Similarly, magnet schools were started in the 1970s as a way to bring about voluntary desegregation. Districts created schools that drew students from outside zoned school boundaries in order to reduce racial isolation without resorting to busing or other mandatory measures. Sometimes these policies were designed to curb “white flight” from desegregating districts, and sometimes they were designed to pull students of different races into otherwise segregated neighborhoods. Houston’s School of Visual and Performing Arts, which opened in the early 1970s, was the first to call itself a “magnet.” The magnets that draw students are programs that appeal to students’ special academic and career interests. Magnets can be found from elementary through high school.

Today, there are roughly 3,400 magnet schools nationwide with 2.6 million students—about as many students as attend charter schools. The states with the most magnet schools are Michigan, Florida, California, and Texas. More than half of large urban school districts have magnet school programs. Some magnet schools are established by school districts, while others function across districts. For example, Connecticut has established more than 50 interdistrict magnet schools in metropolitan Hartford, New Haven, and Waterford to comply with a statewide desegregation case. The schools draw from multiple districts to provide racially diverse educational settings.<sup>20</sup>

Well-integrated magnet schools appear to be strongly attractive, with research finding that those magnet schools reporting increasing levels of racial diversity over a 10-year period had the highest levels of parental demand.

Although magnets were originally developed to enhance racial integration, and many have done so, this goal is more likely to be achieved when new magnet schools with particularly attractive instructional programs are created in strategic locations that can draw on demographically diverse families. In many regions, this requires cross-district initiatives, given racial segregation within districts. For example, one recent study comparing enrollments of schools that converted from neighborhood schools to intradistrict magnets found that while the schools attracted more students from outside the neighborhood, their racial and income composition often remained the same, in part as a result of the intensified residential segregation that has occurred.<sup>21</sup>

In part because of their greater presence in urban areas, magnets enroll a higher percentage of students from low-income families and students of color than other schools. About one third of students in magnet schools are African American, compared with 16% in public schools overall, and 29% are Latino, compared with 20% in public schools overall. More than half of magnet school students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunches, which is now true of the public education system generally.<sup>22</sup>

Section 5301 of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which provides for the Magnet Schools Assistance program, is currently funded at \$97 million annually, which represents a substantial decrease over time. Lack of funding may be related to the fact that demand for such schools has outpaced supply. According to a 2011 survey of magnet schools receiving federal funding, nearly three quarters of magnet schools were oversubscribed.

Well-integrated magnet schools appear to be strongly attractive. An earlier study found that those magnet schools reporting increasing levels of racial diversity over a 10-year period had the highest levels of parental demand.<sup>23</sup> About 82% of these schools reported that students from outside the district were allowed to attend their schools, up from 76% a few years earlier, suggesting the possibility of a growing emphasis on interdistrict choice. Nearly 85% of respondents reported that magnet school programs conducted special outreach to raise awareness about magnet options, and 70% indicated that free transportation was provided to students.<sup>24</sup>

A number of studies of magnet schools in California, Connecticut, and elsewhere have found positive effects on student achievement, graduation rates, student motivation and satisfaction with school, intergroup relationships, teacher motivation and morale, and parent satisfaction with the school.<sup>25</sup> Although a number of the court orders that stimulated open-enrollment plans and magnet school programs have since ended,<sup>26</sup> states and districts have continued many initiatives because of the benefits they bring for school quality and family commitment, as well as for integration.

## Schools Based on Distinct Educational Models

Other schools of choice are based on a common educational model or philosophy, often organized through a network of schools that may cross district or state lines. These may include long-standing models such as Montessori and Waldorf schools; child-centered approaches that have begun to enter the public sector; or newer models such as High Tech High or Envision Education, networks of affiliated high schools engaged in shared models of collaborative, project-based learning. These schools often share common teacher and leader training, curriculum, and assessment designs and may have shared approaches to quality reviews.

Similarly, Linked Learning Academies, operating across districts in California with support from an intermediary organization, offer approaches to career technical education that integrate academic and applied learning in occupational fields. Nationally, career academies associated with the National Academies Foundation also share common approaches and a common portfolio system for graduation. A rigorous accreditation process ensures the integrity and quality of the model across sites.

Some school networks have grown quite extensive. The network of International High Schools—successfully serving new English learners—now operates in California, Maryland, and New York. Big Picture Learning network, which offers hands-on approaches to education through extensive internships in the community, includes 65 schools across the United States and dozens of schools in other countries. EL Education (previously known as Expeditionary Learning) now has more than 150 schools engaged in project-based discovery learning approaches in 33 states, serving 53,000 students. New Tech Network has 126 high schools, 41 middle schools, and 23 elementary schools in 118 districts, serving 72,000 students who are learning to use technology in project-based initiatives that apply their learning to real-world problems.

Depending on the context, these schools operate most often as district-run public schools or sometimes as charters. Many models have both charters and non-charters as members. The individual schools choose a governance approach based on what works most effectively in a given school district or state context. In all cases, they are schools of choice.

Some of these models have demonstrated substantial success. A study by MDRC of new school development in New York, which launched many of these models, found that student performance in the new schools was significantly higher than in the large comprehensive high schools they replaced.<sup>27</sup> An American Institutes of Research evaluation of schools in the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation “deeper learning

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schools”—which includes many of these new networks—also found significant improvements in student performance and attainment.<sup>28</sup>

As districts seek these new school models, they often evolve their own systems of choice, if they have not already developed a fully formed approach. This evolution may lead to selective choice—that is, a few schools to which families may apply outside their usual assigned school—or it may lead to districtwide choice systems like those described earlier, in which families may apply to any school in the district through a single application that ranks choices or through individual applications to schools of interest. These structures become very important in shaping opportunities and access. The district’s role in overseeing and leveraging school quality is also critical.

## Dual Enrollment/Early College

Another form of choice is dual enrollment, in which high school students take some or all of their courses at the college level. In many cases, students take these courses at a local college. In others, they take college-level courses at their high school, taught by high school or college instructors (often called concurrent enrollment). Although dual enrollment does not necessarily mean that a student chooses a school, the student does choose the coursework he or she will take and in many cases the environment in which these courses are offered.

Nationally, dual enrollment in high school and college courses has grown rapidly, especially in the past decade. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 1.3 million students took nearly 2 million college courses within a dual enrollment program in 2010–11, the most recent year for which data are available. That total represents a 75% increase since 2002–03. An additional 136,400 students took college courses on their own. More than four in five high schools—nearly 15,000 schools—offered dual enrollment options.<sup>29</sup>

State rules for participation vary widely. Some states set minimum academic requirements for students participating in dual enrollment programs. In Florida, for example, students must have a minimum 3.0 grade point average (GPA) and attain a minimum score on a placement test to enroll in a college course; a student must have a 2.0 GPA to enroll in a career certificate course. In Iowa, students participating in dual enrollment must be at the proficient level in reading, mathematics, and science on state assessments and must receive written approval from the school board and the postsecondary institution. In California, by contrast, dual enrollment is open to any students approved by their local high schools.

States also vary in how the programs are financed. Minnesota pays the tuition for students enrolled dually and prohibits charges for textbooks or services. But nine states require parents to pay the tuition for students in dual enrollment, 14 states leave decisions to local districts or institutions, and 11 states split costs between districts and parents. In Michigan, districts reimburse postsecondary institutions either the cost of tuition or the prorated per-pupil funding for the student, whichever is less; if tuition exceeds the district reimbursement, parents must make up the difference. Clearly, decisions about funding influence which students and schools are able to participate.

One form of dual enrollment is the Early College High School model. The school’s coursework is usually designed by school districts and institutions of higher education to enable students to earn as much as an associate’s degree or 2 years of credit toward a bachelor’s degree by the time they graduate from high school. To date, more than 240 Early College high schools have opened.



Thus far, Early College high schools serve high concentrations of students from low-income families and students of color. About three fourths of the students are students of color, including 41% Latino and 25% African American, and 57% are from low-income families. Nearly half will be the first in their families to attend college.<sup>30</sup> Unlike dual enrollment programs, which are generally aimed at students who are already academically prepared for college coursework, Early College high schools are aimed at all students. Thus, the schools also provide support services, such as tutoring and counseling, to enable students who may be struggling to pursue higher education.

Students in Early College high schools were significantly more likely than comparison students to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and complete college.

An evaluation of this initiative found that students in Early College high schools were significantly more likely than comparison students to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and complete college. The impact on college attainment was greatest for students of color and those from low-income families.<sup>31</sup>

## Providing Choice Options Through Charter Schools

### Description of Charters

The most recent version of school choice is charter schools. According to the U.S. Department of Education,

[a] *public charter school* is a publicly funded school that is typically governed by a group or organization under a legislative contract (or charter) with the state, district, or other entity. The charter exempts the school from certain state or local rules and regulations. In return for flexibility and autonomy, the charter school must meet the accountability standards outlined in its charter. A school's charter is reviewed periodically by the entity that granted it, most commonly every five years, and can be revoked if guidelines on curriculum and management are not followed or if the accountability standards are not met.

In cases where charters are authorized by districts that offer strong oversight, districts have sought to incorporate charters into their existing school choice systems that operate as a “portfolio” system of schools.<sup>32</sup> For example, in Sacramento, CA, and Denver, CO, the districts have organized both district-run schools of choice and charters in a unified system of admissions, facilities, and professional development support. In some other cases, charters have been stand-alone enterprises running their own admissions and operations with little intersection, oversight, or support from district management.

Charter schools can have a range of management structures—67% of all charter schools are independently run, single-site schools. Twenty percent of charter operators manage more than one school. These are known as charter management organizations (CMOs), which may be nonprofit or for-profit.<sup>33</sup> Overall, just under 13% of charter schools are for-profit. However, the number of for-profit management companies running charter schools increased twentyfold between 1995 and 2012, from five to 99, and the number of schools they operate increased more than a hundredfold, from six to 758.<sup>34</sup>

Forty-four states plus the District of Columbia have charter laws, which differ substantially from one another. Some states have tight accountability requirements for authorizers and for charters themselves, while others have fewer and less rigorous expectations for the qualifications of staff; the nature of the curriculum; student recruitment, admissions, and retention practices; and financial viability. Some states prohibit for-profit providers or online charters. Others have a large number of both.

An area of recent growth has been the spread of virtual or online charters, where instruction takes place over the Internet. In 2015–16, 528 full-time virtual schools enrolled 278,511 students in 34 states. Private education

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management organizations operated 29% of the full-time virtual schools; however, those schools accounted for 70% of all students enrolled in this sector. Two for-profit companies—K12 Inc. and Connections—enroll over 60% of total virtual school charter students. While charter schools account for 82% of virtual schools, some states and districts have also been creating virtual schools.<sup>35</sup>

Currently, about 6,700 charter schools serve approximately 2.7 million children—about 5% of all students and nearly the same number as attend magnet schools.<sup>36</sup> However, the proportion of students in charter schools varies widely among states. In Arizona, for example, 19% of students are in charter schools, while in Connecticut and New Hampshire, only 1% of students are in charter schools. In most districts, charters serve a relatively small number of all students; however, in New Orleans, LA, nearly all students are in charter schools, and in Detroit and Flint, MI, more than half of students are in charter schools.

### Charter Outcomes

In terms of achievement, research finds mixed outcomes for charters as a group, with some doing better and others doing worse than district-run public schools. A large-scale study of student data from 16 states, from the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, found that 17% of charter schools produced greater academic gains than traditional public schools, while 37% performed worse than their traditional public school counterparts serving similar students. The largest share showed no difference.<sup>37</sup>

In states with multiple authorizers, charter student achievement was lower than that in traditional public schools. This suggests that where there are many authorizers without strong accountability, charters may choose the authorizer with the most relaxed standards.

More recent studies from CREDO use a methodology that compares charter school students only to those who come from public “feeder” schools that send students to those charters. These sending schools represent a small minority of public schools in each state, frequently those in more high-need communities where charters and their feeders are concentrated. They do not represent a comparison between charter school outcomes and those of all district-run public schools in a state or district. These studies tend to find somewhat more positive, though still mixed, results for charters in comparison to the schools that send them students.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, as a group, charters vary widely in terms of graduation rates. NCES identified 30% of charter schools as low-graduation-rate high schools in 2013–14, and charter school graduation rates averaged 70% compared to 82% in public schools overall. However, 44% of charters had higher than average graduation rates of 85% and above.

Studies find very different outcomes for charters across states, a result that is linked to their different laws and policies.<sup>39</sup> For example, the CREDO study noted above found that outcomes vary across states, and that certain state policies appear to be correlated with charter school student achievement. In states with multiple authorizers, charter student achievement was lower than that in traditional public schools. This suggests that where there are many authorizers without strong accountability, charters may choose the authorizer with the most relaxed standards.

For instance, in Arizona and Ohio, where an unregulated market strategy with many authorizers has created a huge range of for-profit and nonprofit providers, studies have found that charter school students achieve at consistently lower levels than their demographically similar public school counterparts.<sup>40</sup> Arizona and Ohio also have among the highest percentages of low-graduation-rate charter high schools, along with California, Hawaii, and Indiana.<sup>41</sup>

NCES data show that 87% of virtual schools were identified as low-graduation-rate schools in 2013–14, with an average graduation rate of only 40%, less than half the national average rate of 82%.

Ohio allows for more types of organizations to become authorizers than any other state. There are currently more than 65 authorizers in the state, and over 50% of charter schools in Ohio have been sponsored by entities not connected with any public agency. As a result, there has been a proliferation of charters, leading to concerns about both quality and accountability.<sup>42</sup> There are also many authorizers in Arizona, where charters are granted for 15 years with little accountability in the interim.<sup>43</sup>

Whereas 20 states and Puerto Rico require charter school teachers to be certified like other public school teachers, Arizona is among the five states (plus DC) that do not. Ohio is among the 18 states that allow for some uncertified teachers to teach in charter schools under certain conditions but require most teaching staff to hold certification.<sup>44</sup>

By contrast, in Massachusetts, the highest performing state overall on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, charter students typically achieve at high levels (as indicated by separate studies from Harvard, MIT, and Stanford University).<sup>45</sup> These charters operate under a cap on the total number of charters, which voters refused to lift in November 2016. The state's 81 charters are held to rigorous expectations not only for curriculum, staffing quality, and academic performance but also for the admission and retention of high-need students.

Another challenge has surfaced with the recent proliferation of online or virtual schools, many of which are for-profit. A recent study by CREDO found that virtual or online charters had far lower achievement for their students in both mathematics and reading than traditional public schools serving similar students. The differences in student learning equated to a student losing 72 days of learning in reading and 180 days of learning in mathematics, based on a 180-day school year.<sup>46</sup> NCES data also show that 87% of virtual schools were identified as low-graduation-rate schools in 2013–14, with an average graduation rate of only 40%, less than half the national average rate of 82%. States with the highest percentage of non-graduates coming from virtual schools included Ohio, Idaho, Pennsylvania, and Colorado.<sup>47</sup>

Many online charters are also for-profit. States differ as to whether they allow online or for-profit charters; some states prohibit them, while others have authorized many. For example, for-profit charters comprise 13% of all charters nationwide, but make up 79% of the charters in Michigan, which has the most of any state.

## Policies Addressing Charter Challenges

The policy differences between states such as Massachusetts, with high-performing charters, and Arizona and Ohio, with low-performing charters, are noteworthy. In contrast to Arizona and Ohio, Massachusetts authorizes only nonprofit charters. These are approved through the state Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education, which reviews charter applications for high-quality curriculum plans and requires all staff to meet the state’s rigorous certification standards. Charters must share successful innovations with other schools and districts and must maintain high standards to be reauthorized.

Massachusetts charters admit students by lottery and must serve special education students and English learners. Charters cannot push out students who are challenging to educate. Their plans for recruiting and retaining students must be publicly posted and are monitored extensively by the Department of Education, which not only approves these plans and monitors enrollment and attrition data but also makes anonymous “mystery parent” calls to verify that students with high levels of need are provided with “equal and unfettered access to each school’s application and enrollment process.”<sup>48</sup> To renew a charter for an additional 5 years, a school must affirmatively demonstrate faithfulness to its charter, academic program success, and organizational viability, as well as adherence to its recruitment and retention plan to serve high-need students.

The policies in Massachusetts have been designed to avoid key challenges some other states have experienced. Most studies have found that charters underserve English learners and special education students relative to public schools in their districts.<sup>49</sup> They are also more racially and economically segregated than public schools generally.<sup>50</sup>

Concerns have been raised about “creaming and cropping”—a process by which schools admit only the most promising students and push out those who struggle to learn through counseled transfers or disciplinary expulsions.<sup>51</sup> Both charters and district-run schools have engaged in these practices,<sup>52</sup> but it is easier for charters that manage their own admissions and expulsion policies to do so. For example, in California, where this practice is illegal, a recent study found that 1-in-5 charters violates state law by restricting access for high-need students.<sup>53</sup>

In New Orleans, which is now entirely composed of charters, the Southern Poverty Law Center sued to ensure that charter schools would accept special education students, as most refused to admit those with significant needs. Even after the lawsuit was resolved, Stanford University researchers found that special education students, those from the most impoverished families, and other vulnerable young people had little choice in the system, as they were often assigned, against their will, to failing schools that they could not choose their way out of. These schools frequently close, bouncing students to another failing school—a practice that reduces their achievement further.<sup>54</sup> Although New Orleans has some innovative

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and successful charters, they disproportionately serve the more racially, economically, and educationally advantaged students, and when they fill up, there are few worthy choices remaining.<sup>55</sup>

The experiences of students in many charters were described in the recently released NAACP report *Quality education for all, one school at a time*.<sup>56</sup> Based on seven hearings across the country, the report highlighted both the good work of some charters and the problems with others. These range from exclusionary admissions and pushout policies to placements in schools far from children’s homes to poor teaching and financial scandals.

The report noted that simply closing failing charter schools is not an adequate answer to low quality. More than 2,500 charters have closed since 2001—nearly 40% of charters started in that time—disrupting the education of tens of thousands of children, most of them children of color from low-income families. These disruptions reduce achievement for the children who have to change schools, sometimes midyear, and may leave them traveling far from home to find a school that will take them.

It is important to ensure a strong public system that can focus on what is needed to create high-quality schools, improve schools, and manage choice so that all children have schools worth choosing that are readily available to them within their communities.

Some cities have begun to figure out strategies to manage choice. For example, Denver has created a system with many high-quality options, both by providing district-run schools of choice and charters and by supporting professional development for both types of schools. The city operates a rigorous authorization process for charters and ensures that all students are served by schools they want to choose by managing the admissions process. Lotteries are used to allocate students to schools they have selected (so that high-need students are not excluded), and spots are filled from the lottery wait list when there is attrition during the year. Charters cannot independently expel students; they must go through a district-run process that provides due process and seeks to minimize student exclusions. States can support this kind of system by the incentives and frameworks they provide in legislation and regulation.

It is important to ensure a strong public system that can focus on what is needed to create high-quality schools, improve schools, and manage choice so that all children have schools worth choosing that are readily available to them within their communities.

## Public Funding to Attend Private Schools

States have used several strategies to offer choice through public funding that supports private school attendance. These include vouchers, tuition tax credits or deductions, and education spending accounts (ESAs) that can be applied to a variety of education costs.

### Voucher Programs

Currently, 14 states and the District of Columbia operate a total of 26 voucher programs.<sup>57</sup> (The DC program was created by Congress in 2004. It remains the only federally funded voucher program.) A number of other states have put forth legislative or ballot measures on vouchers that were ultimately rejected by the courts, often for reasons of separation of church and state, since most private schools are religiously affiliated. Ballot initiatives to spend public funds for private school vouchers have been rejected in California (twice), Colorado, Oregon, Utah, and Washington.

The programs vary in many ways. Most states restrict who is eligible for the programs. In 11 states, voucher programs are aimed at students with disabilities. In Florida, for example, the John M. McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities is a statewide program, adopted in 1999, that allows any student in the state with an individual education program to receive a voucher to attend a private school. In 2017, 31,499 students participated at 1,454 schools.<sup>58</sup>

Other states limit vouchers to students from low-income families, students who had previously attended a public school, or students from certain geographical areas (such as Wisconsin's program for Milwaukee students). Two states, Ohio and Wisconsin, which adopted a statewide voucher program in 2013, limit the number of students who can participate, although Wisconsin's cap, which increases each year, is scheduled to be lifted in 2026–27.

States also differ in what they require of participating schools. Most states require schools to administer state assessments or some other standardized tests. Generally, however, states attach no conditions to the outcomes on these tests regarding schools' eligibility to receive vouchers. Six states require schools to be accredited by a state or regional agency or to receive a charter from the state board of education. Wisconsin requires teachers to be licensed, and other jurisdictions, such as Oklahoma and DC, require teachers to have bachelor's degrees and meet other requirements. Other states have few requirements for participating schools.<sup>59</sup>

States vary in the value of the voucher, which can affect which private schools students can attend. In Indiana, the state sets a sliding-scale cut point, with a greater share of the maximum allowable amount available to children from lower income families. Generally, vouchers cover a relatively small amount of the total cost of an independent private school.

The history of vouchers in the United States is associated with support for white flight from public schools in southern school districts, such as Prince Edward County, VA, that were seeking to avoid desegregation.<sup>60</sup> Recent studies have found evidence of both segregative and integrative effects in different programs that operate under different circumstances.<sup>61</sup>

Whether using a voucher to attend a private school supports student achievement is a question with mixed results. For many years, studies reported little difference in achievement for students using vouchers, with relatively small positive and negative results found, often differing among

subgroups and shifting from year to year, program to program, grade level to grade level, or subject to subject.<sup>62</sup> Recently, however, four major studies of large statewide programs in Indiana, Louisiana, and DC found substantial negative effects on achievement for students who received vouchers to attend private schools compared to similar students who stayed in public schools.<sup>63</sup>

The schools generally viewed as most desirable typically have long waiting lists and do not have room or any need to accept additional students on vouchers.

It is unclear whether the expansion of vouchers in these states caused a proliferation of lower quality schools to start up or to accept voucher students; whether private schools (which in some states do not need to hire trained or certified teachers) were less prepared to meet the needs of the students they accepted on vouchers; or whether other restrictions on the vouchers meant that higher quality private schools did not accept voucher students. In any event, the schools generally viewed as most desirable typically have long waiting lists and do not have room or any need to accept additional students on vouchers.

One of the studies from Louisiana,<sup>64</sup> which found large negative impacts on mathematics, reading, science, and social studies achievement, examined a statewide program targeted to children from low-income families attending low-achieving schools. The authors found that one third of private schools participating in the program had previously experienced declining enrollment, suggesting these private schools may have been struggling before the voucher program, and indicating the need to consider the quality of schools allowed to participate in such programs.<sup>65</sup>

## Tax Credits or Deductions

States have created two kinds of tax incentives to support tuition for students attending private schools. Eight states allow parents to receive a reduction in their tax bills for education expenses. Alabama, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and South Carolina provide a tax credit that reduces the amount of tax a family owes. In Alabama, the credit is refundable, meaning that the family receives the amount of the credit even if its tax bill is less than the amount of the credit.

Indiana, Louisiana, Minnesota, and Wisconsin provide a deduction from taxable income for education expenses. This option is only available to families who itemize their deductions—generally the wealthier 30% of households who tend to itemize deductions and have larger tax liabilities.<sup>66</sup>

The amount of the benefit to families varies. In Alabama, the amount of the credit is equal to 80% of state per-pupil expenditures or the cost of tuition, whichever is less. In Wisconsin, the amount of the deduction can equal the full cost of tuition, but it is capped at \$5,000.

Eligibility for the programs varies as well. In Alabama, the program is limited to parents of students who transfer from a “failing” (i.e., persistently low-performing) school to a non-failing public school or accredited private school.<sup>67</sup> South Carolina’s refundable tax credit is available only for students with disabilities.

A second type of tax incentive is a tax credit for individuals—and corporations—who contribute to an organization that provides scholarships for students to attend private schools. Arizona was the first to adopt this type of program, in 1997. Currently, 17 states have such programs.<sup>68</sup>

Under the programs, states designate approved organizations that can accept donations and award scholarships to students to attend private and religious schools. Some states place strict limits on eligibility for scholarships and limit the amount of tax credits that can be claimed. In Alabama, for example, 75% of scholarship recipients must have attended a public school the previous year, and the proportion of scholarships for students from low-income families must be equal to the proportion of low-income students in the county. Scholarship organizations must provide annual reports on the number of scholarships awarded and how many went to students from low-income families. The state caps the total amount of credits at \$30 million per year.<sup>69</sup>

Arizona, by contrast, has few eligibility requirements and does not limit the dollar amount of the scholarships awarded. Although the state requires scholarship organizations to report on recipients, including their income levels, it does not require schools that enroll scholarship recipients to administer state tests or other standardized assessments.

Some reports have highlighted possible abuses associated with the scholarship tax credits. In Georgia, for example, where the state makes scholarships available only for students who had previously attended public schools, reports emerged that some parents registered their children in public schools in order to later take advantage of the scholarships, but did not actually ever enroll their children in public schools.<sup>70</sup>

The tax credit programs have also faced legal challenges. A group of Arizona taxpayers filed suit against that state's program, charging that it violated the U.S. Constitution by providing taxpayer funds to religious schools. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2011 that the plaintiffs lacked standing to challenge the program; however, other challenges may emerge from plaintiffs with standing.

## Education Savings Accounts

Education Savings Accounts (ESAs), pioneered by Arizona in 2011, provide state funds to parents' savings accounts that can be used to pay tuition in private and religious schools, as well as to cover other education costs, such as tutoring, textbooks, specialized therapy, extracurricular activities, online or Advanced Placement classes, or to reserve funds for college. Currently, six states have ESA programs on the books, although Nevada's program is suspended because of ongoing litigation. A total of 11,482 families have participated in the programs in Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Data for North Carolina are not available.<sup>71</sup>

Early ESA programs (e.g., those in Florida, Mississippi, and Tennessee) targeted those who qualified for special education services or had other restrictions. For example, in Arizona, participants must have attended a public school in the prior year and attended a school earning a D or F on the state's accountability system, be in foster care, or live on a Native American reservation. Nevada's program, however, sought to offer universal eligibility. Facing a legal challenge, the program was blocked from implementation by the courts in January 2016; the court decision could be precedent-setting for this approach to education choice.<sup>72</sup>

The amount of the ESA benefit varies. In Arizona, students from low-income families receive 100% of the per-pupil base funding (currently \$5,600), while those from higher income families receive 90% of the base funding. Tennessee's program provides 100% of the funding tied to the student, which includes the supplement for students with disabilities.<sup>73</sup>

## Homeschooling

One of the most widely used forms of school choice is the oldest type of education: homeschooling. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 1.8 million students, or 3.4% of the student population, were homeschooled in 2012.<sup>74</sup> This was double the number and rate from 1999. All 50 states and DC allow homeschooling.

The vast majority of homeschooled students in 2012 were White (83%) and non-poor (89%), with disproportionate shares in rural areas.<sup>75</sup> About 44% of parents of homeschooled students had a bachelor's degree or higher; only 2% had less than a high school diploma.

Most homeschooled students (62%) were at the middle or high school level. Most parents (91%) cited concerns about the environment of other schools, such as safety, drugs, or peer pressure, as an important factor, and 25% cited such concerns as the most important factor. Three fourths cited dissatisfaction with academic instruction in other schools, and two thirds cited a desire to provide religious instruction.<sup>76</sup>

States vary widely in their regulation of homeschooling. Thirty-eight states require parents to notify the state's department of education or local school district if they are homeschooling their child, but the extent of oversight is quite different from state to state. In California, for example, parents must file an affidavit with the state annually, including enrollment and course work information. In Louisiana, the parents' application for homeschooling must include progress information and must be approved by the state board of elementary and secondary education. In Arizona, by contrast, parents must notify the county board of education at the outset of homeschooling, but there are no notification requirements thereafter. In 12 states there are no requirements.<sup>77</sup>

States also vary in their requirements for parent teachers, for curriculum, and for assessment. Only 13 states require parent instructors to have qualifications, usually a high school diploma; three of these states—Minnesota, Virginia, and Washington—along with Washington, DC, allow waivers of these requirements. In Colorado and Montana, a family member, not necessarily a parent, can provide instruction. Only two states—Arkansas and Pennsylvania—conduct background checks of parent instructors and prohibit homeschooling if a family member has been convicted of a crime or is a registered sex offender.

More than half the states require homeschooled students to receive instruction in certain subjects, usually mathematics, English language arts, science, and social studies. But six states—Alaska, Arkansas, Delaware, Mississippi, Utah, and Virginia—do not require any specific subjects. And four states—Kansas, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Oklahoma—mandate hours of instruction but do not stipulate the subjects that must be taught in those hours.<sup>78</sup>

Twenty states require homeschooled students to be assessed, but the form and frequency of the assessments can vary. In 12 states, students must

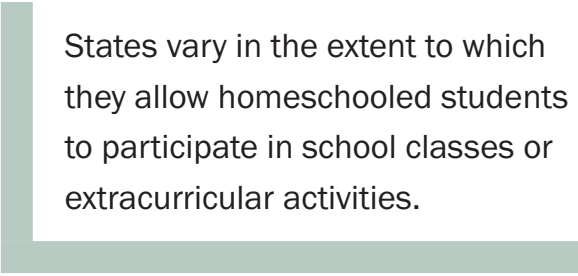
States vary widely in their regulation of homeschooling and their requirements for parent teachers, for curriculum, and for assessment. Only 13 states require parent instructors to have qualifications, usually a high school diploma.

take standardized tests, but not all of them require annual or even frequent testing. Other states allow alternatives to standardized tests ranging from local district advisory boards that review students' academic progress to parent evaluations.<sup>79</sup>

States also vary in the extent to which they allow homeschooled students to participate in school classes or extracurricular activities. Thirty states allow some form of participation, though in some cases students can only do so with permission from the local district or if they are dual-enrolled or enrolled part time. California and Washington have instituted programs through which school districts aiding homeschooling families are reimbursed by the state.<sup>80</sup>

Adequately controlled research on the population of homeschooled children is scarce. Often the samples are a subset of volunteers who do not represent the population as a whole, and studies do not control for the characteristics of the sample. Participants generally come from the more affluent segment of the homeschooled population. These studies suggest that these students tend to do as well as or better than public school students on standardized tests—typically better in English language arts than in mathematics or science. Those who take the SAT and ACT typically achieve above-average scores; however, they tend to represent a smaller share of the homeschooling population (usually fewer than one fourth) than is the case in public schools, where more than half of students take college admissions tests during high school.<sup>81</sup> Other studies suggest that homeschoolers are far underrepresented among the college population in proportion to their share of all students.<sup>82</sup>

Although some homeschooled children do well, there is wide variability among them. A study using matched pairs of students from public schools with homeschoolers found that homeschoolers from more structured educational environments (i.e., with a more structured curriculum, focused instruction, and use of time) did better than public school students, but those from less structured educational environments did worse.<sup>83</sup>



States vary in the extent to which they allow homeschooled students to participate in school classes or extracurricular activities.



## Challenges of Research on Choice

Our knowledge of the effects of different choices on academic outcomes is limited by a number of challenges that should be kept in mind when examining research results. It is important that policymakers are mindful of these three factors when interpreting results.

### 1. Acknowledging the effects of different contexts on results of different choice options for different students

Because states and districts organize, fund, support, and regulate choices differently, the effects of choices such as interdistrict options, magnet schools, charter schools, or vouchers in one context may be entirely different from those in another. This may be because of the content and quality of the options provided, as well as the nature of the different student groups who participate as a result of access rules or other local variables. Consequently, it is not possible to assume that the results of a study of charter schools in Boston would generalize to those in Chicago, or that the results from homeschoolers in Georgia apply to those in Oregon. It is also unlikely that the kind of school options developed by a district with substantial funding, quality standards, and professional development supports will be the same as those in a district that simply authorizes alternatives without cultivating their quality.

### 2. Controlling for other variables that affect outcomes

It is important when evaluating outcomes to account for background factors that also affect achievement. These include family income and education, student learning characteristics (such as special education needs or language background), and opportunities to learn outside of the school context, among other factors. If studies do not control for these differences, they may attribute results to the choice of school rather than to other factors that are differentially represented in the comparison group. In addition, when studying the results of school choices, it is difficult to make causal claims in part because families that make the effort to seek out such schools may be more motivated or advantaged in ways that are not captured by other variables that are easily controlled. Thus, the strongest studies both adjust for or match the characteristics of students served and, where possible, compare samples of students who sought to exercise choice (for example, comparing students who were selected by a lottery with others who participated in the same lottery but were not selected for the particular program option).

### 3. Creating comparable samples to support comparisons

The uniqueness of the many choice options and the contexts within which they occur can make it difficult to find or create samples of students to support valid comparisons. For example, when looking at the effects of New Orleans reforms after Hurricane Katrina, studies could not easily account for the loss of thousands of families—mostly lower income—who never returned after the hurricane and the change in student demographics associated with the more advantaged group of homeowners and business owners who returned to the city.<sup>84</sup>

The choice of comparison groups can result in very different findings, even when studies use controls for student income or other characteristics. For example, because of the difficulties associated with creating a comparison group for evaluating effects, one study used students from other districts outside of New Orleans as controls for students inside New Orleans, despite the city's unique student population and context. This study found positive outcomes over time relative to similar students not from New Orleans.<sup>85</sup> Another study found negative effects of the city's reforms when looking at the actual students from New Orleans: It found that evacuees who stayed away after Katrina did better academically than those who came back, with the highest evacuee achievement gains in traditional public schools outside New Orleans.<sup>86</sup>

Similarly, a study that compared the performance of charter school students in Louisiana to the performance of those who came from feeder schools that sent students to those charters found positive results for students in charters in comparison to similar students in the sending schools.<sup>87</sup> However, these feeders represented only about one fourth of the public schools in the state. Another study looking at all of the public schools in the state found that Louisiana charter school students performed much lower than comparable public school students in district-run schools.<sup>88</sup>

Thus, different studies using different kinds of comparison groups can come to very different findings. It is important for policymakers to interpret research and its implications carefully, and to seek to commission and use research that can most accurately answer their key policy questions.

## Key Policy Considerations

Choice has been expanding, producing many types of positive opportunities for many children, but it is clear that simply providing choices does not automatically provide high-quality options that are accessible to all students or improve student learning.

What follows are some of the considerations policymakers can take into account as they seek to expand high-quality education options within the public sector.

### High-Quality Neighborhood Schools

National data show that when parents have choice options available, three quarters choose their assigned school—usually their neighborhood public school—and identify it as their first choice.<sup>89</sup> And when parents want to choose a different school, they often cite distance as a challenge. Districts also cite transportation costs for choice plans that bus many children across large distances as an issue. In New Orleans, where all schools are now charters, many children are bussed long distances, often passing other schools on the way, at a cost of \$33 million annually, because schools emerged without a centralized planning process.<sup>90</sup> In other districts, such as Detroit, school closures have created what some observers have called “educational deserts” within the city.<sup>91</sup>

If the first, most desired option for most families is a quality neighborhood public school, part of planning for options is considering how to create high-quality options in all communities to the greatest extent possible. This suggests that geographic considerations for the placement of new schools and the preservation of existing schools are important to fold into expectations for planning, along with processes for assessing and improving quality.

In states and districts that have had successful approaches to choice, such as Massachusetts, there is a regular assessment of the quality of each school’s offerings, staffing, and services, often through a School Quality Review or other assessment system,<sup>92</sup> with supports and interventions to improve schools that may be lagging. These may include professional development for educators, strengthening leadership, improvements in curriculum, or the creation of community school models that provide wraparound health and social services where students need them. Some districts—including Boston, Denver, and New York City—provide this kind of review and assistance for traditional public schools and charters, and offer professional learning opportunities to both, so as to improve opportunities for children, rather than having to close failing schools. Under ESSA, many states are creating school review and assistance programs that can create systems of continuous improvement for all schools.

### Intradistrict and Interdistrict Choice Options

Successful intradistrict and interdistrict choice plans can expand high-quality options and serve the public purposes of education when

- districts work to ensure that many high-quality choices are available, and continually seek to improve schools so that no students are left in low-quality options;
- strong systems of information are readily available to parents;
- application processes are consolidated, not burdensome, and are equally accessible;

- choice is managed to support racial/ethnic and economic integration, both within and across district lines; and
- transportation is free and readily available.

## Dual Enrollment and Early College Options

States can expand and improve course-taking options for high school students—and improve the efficiency of their educational systems—by

- encouraging community colleges and 4-year colleges to partner with local high schools and to offer distance learning courses to expand offerings to secondary students who are ready for more advanced learning opportunities;
- underwriting the costs of dual enrollment in college courses while students are still in high school;
- stimulating the creation of Early College programs through competitive grants or availability of seed money; and
- ensuring that all students have access to the prerequisite coursework in middle and high school.

## Charter Schools

States and districts can improve the odds that charter schools will provide high-quality options to students by:

- Having a small number of **authorizers** who are held to strong accountability standards. Typically, these are local education agencies and/or the state education agency operating under expectations that they will enforce state standards and monitor charter school practices and performance.
- Ensuring that charters must meet **standards for quality** pertaining to curriculum, instruction, and assessment; hiring qualified teachers; and requiring financial viability to be authorized or renewed. Some states also look for high levels of community and public support and demonstrations that the school has feasible plans for attaining high levels of achievement for students.<sup>93</sup>
- Ensuring **access** by requiring student recruitment, retention plans, and monitoring access to and continuation in schools for students with disabilities, English learners, and students of varied racial/ethnic, economic, and educational backgrounds.
- Using a regular **reporting and review system** to ensure a reasonable standard of quality. For example, Connecticut requires an annual report on the condition of the school, including the educational progress of students, financial condition, a certified audit statement of all revenues and expenditures, accomplishment of the mission of the charter school, the racial and ethnic composition of the student body and efforts taken to increase that diversity, and best practices employed by the school that contribute significantly to the academic success of students.<sup>94</sup>
- Prohibiting or placing clear restrictions and standards on **for-profit schools** to keep taxpayer funds for public purposes, and to remove incentives for schools or educational management organizations to make a profit by restricting student services or denying access to children who are expensive to educate.

## Virtual Schools

States that choose to support virtual or online schools can reduce the negative outcomes that have been recorded for this school sector and enhance the chances that these schools will provide productive options for students by

- maintaining **additional special oversight** for the operations of virtual/online schools, if they are authorized, so that students receive adequate support and services from a sufficient number of qualified staff with technology tools fully in place.

Of the 24 states that define or permit virtual charter schools, 20 include additional oversight for these schools.<sup>95</sup> Since 2015, more than 20 state legislatures have introduced bills to strengthen review and accountability over the quality of courses, teachers, and student supports, as well as to protect the privacy of student data and limit profit-making and misreporting of student enrollment and attendance.<sup>96</sup>

## Private School Options

Among ongoing debates and litigation about the legality of public funding for nonpublic (especially religious) schools, a small number of states provide public funding for vouchers for students to attend private schools, with mixed outcomes for achievement. Education tax credits, deductions, or education savings accounts have also been created in some states to offset private schools costs, especially for parents of students with disabilities. To support student outcomes, appropriate uses of public funds, and democratic goals, states can consider

- maintaining **standards of quality** for schools that are the recipients of these funds, through requirements for accreditation, staff qualifications, and curriculum plans, as well as information from assessments of student progress;
- ensuring **nondiscrimination standards** on the basis of race, class, gender and sexual orientation, and disability status for schools that are recipients of funds to protect civil rights of students and to discourage segregation or discrimination; and
- funding only those options that **advance state purposes**, like the provision of more specialized high-quality services to students with disabilities, as some programs are designed to do, or the provision of opportunities for advanced study (such as AP courses) otherwise unavailable to students.

## Homeschooling

All 50 states allow homeschooling. In general, states' concerns have to do with ensuring that all students are receiving an education that will allow them to fully participate in the economy and civic life, and that no students are failing to attend school due to neglect rather than parent engagement in their education. Research suggests that states can encourage responsible practice by

- requiring **registration or application** for homeschooling intentions, so that students not enrolled in school are expected to be under educational care;
- requiring **evidence of a structured program of study** that covers key aspects of curriculum, minimal qualifications from instructors, and some form of regular assessment of learning; and
- providing financial **support for districts that include homeschooled students** in aspects of the curriculum, students' services, or extracurricular activities.

## Research

Sorting out how to provide students with excellent and equitable educational opportunities—and to ensure that the state has an educated citizenry on which to build an inclusive society and a productive economy—is no small feat in the complex world of education. States can better inform their efforts by

- using **high-quality research** that includes appropriate sampling strategies, comparison groups, and controls wherever possible when designing new policies to expand student learning opportunities and to advance other desirable goals such as desegregation; and
- including **research and evaluation requirements** in new policy initiatives and attending to the outcomes of research in reviewing and revising existing policies to better meet states' goals for high-quality education and equitable access.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the challenge is to create a system filled with schools worth choosing in which all students have a genuine right to choose and have access to schools that serve them well. Our common welfare is best served when investments in schools enable all young people to become productive, responsible citizens prepared to participate effectively in the political, social, and economic life of their democracy.

As John Dewey wrote more than a century ago in *The School and Society*,

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy. ... Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself.<sup>97</sup>

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