



OCTOBER 2015

UPDATED JANUARY 2017



A School Choice Primer

Giving parents and students the ability to choose their school is promoted by supporters as the key to improving American education overall. On the surface, the idea has great appeal. Who, after all, opposes having choices? Indeed, both Democratic and Republican policymakers, including President Trump, have embraced school choice as a reform strategy, whether it's limited to alternatives within the public school system or provides taxpayer dollars to students to take to private schools or providers. For this reason alone, American voters should be asking: does school choice live up to its supporters' claims?

In 2015, NSBA's Center for Public Education sought to answer this question in an at-a-glance overview of school choice in all its permutations: choice within the public school system (traditional public schools, magnet and charter schools); choice outside the public schools (private schools, vouchers and tax credits, homeschooling); and virtual schools which can be either public or private.

We have updated this edition in order to include the results of new studies that shed more light on the impact of schools of choice. A few findings stand out. Unlike charter schools overall – which aren't as universally high performing as their publicity suggests – urban charter schools tend to perform well compared to their traditional counterparts. In contrast, online charters are even more ineffective than we previously understood them to be. And a major study of Louisiana vouchers showed a negative impact on student achievement after two years. Add it up and our conclusion is basically the same as it was a year ago. We find that school choices work for some students sometimes, are worse for some students sometimes, and are usually no better or worse than traditional public schools.

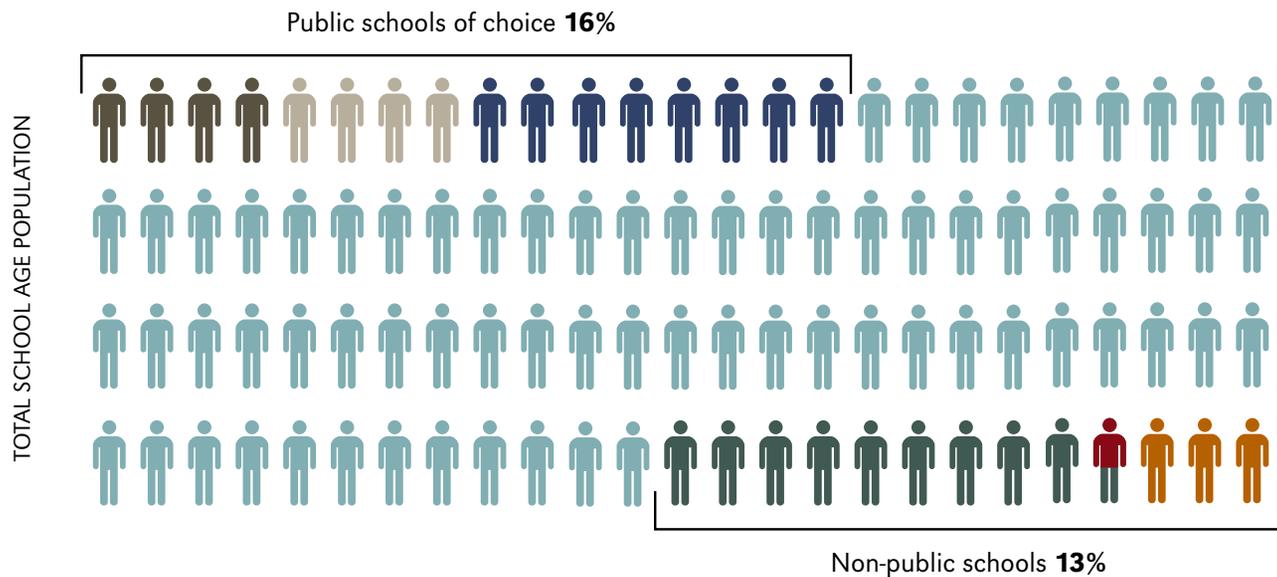
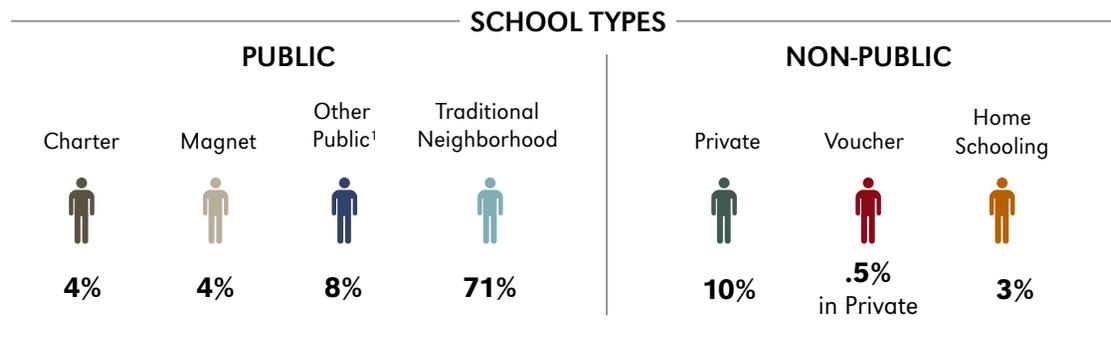
As before, we hope that this report will inform the ongoing conversation about the efficacy of school choice in the nation's efforts to assure every child is prepared for college, careers and citizenship.

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REALITY CHECK

After more than two decades of choice polices, enrollments in schools of choice are still relatively small. **87%** of all school-aged children are **in public schools**.



¹Other public includes inter- and intra-district transfers

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

DEFINITION

Public Schools

Every state provides a free, public education that is available to every school-age child in the state. Every state also has compulsory education laws, typically for children between ages **5-7** & **16-18**.

STATE POLICY

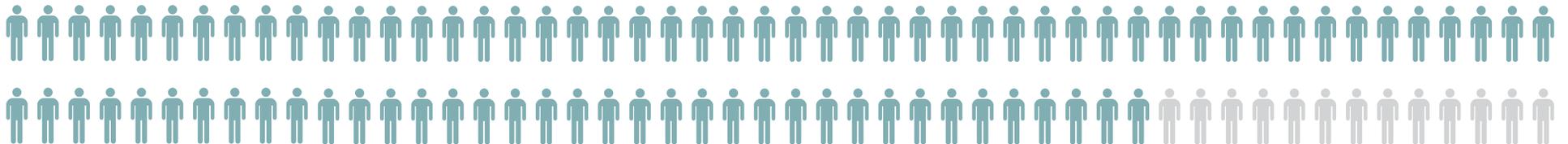


Public schools must meet all local, state & federal accountability standards.

ENROLLMENT

Public schools serve **87%** of the school-aged population.

Public School Students



PUBLIC SCHOOLS

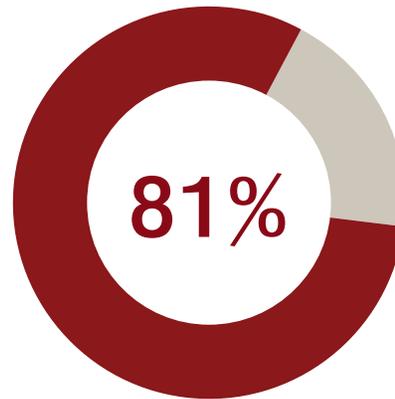
IMPACT

Public Schools

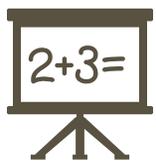
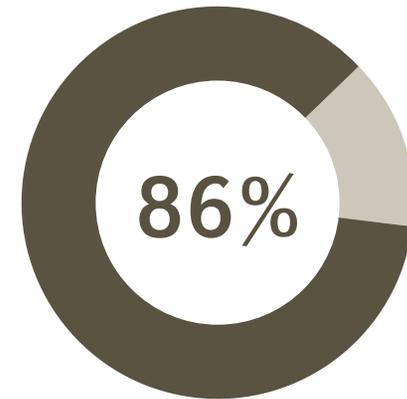
2011-12

By many measures, public schools are performing better than ever. High school graduation rates are at historic highs as is the math performance of 4th and 8th graders. Most public school students still attend traditional neighborhood schools, but they are being given more choices like magnet schools and charters within the public education system.

81% of public high school students graduated on time.



By age 24, **86%** had earned a diploma.



In 1995, U.S. 8th graders scored below the international average in math; 20 years later, they were well above the average and were outscored by only 6 of 33 participating countries.

Source: TIMSS, 2015

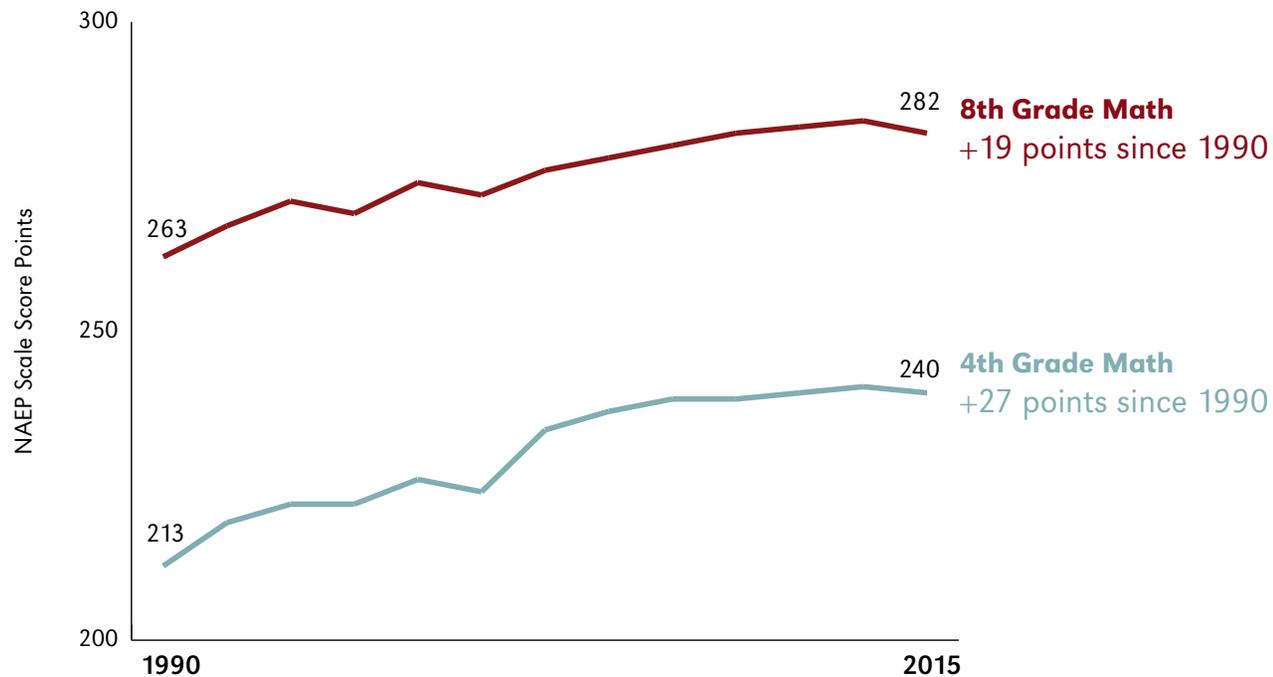
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

IMPACT

Public Schools

Public School Student Gains on NAEP-Math
1990-2015

Today's public school 4th & 8th graders are performing two years ahead in math compared to their peers in 1990. They are reading about a half year ahead.



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress 2015. 10 points on the NAEP scale is about one year's worth of learning.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

DEFINITION

Magnet Schools

Public schools with specialized courses or curriculum. They can have admissions requirements, but they must meet local, state & federal accountability standards.

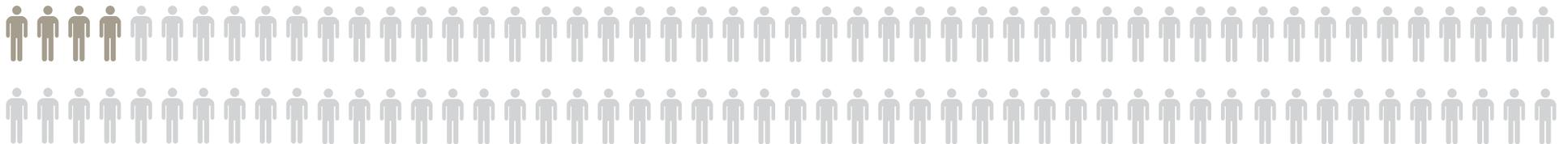
STATE POLICY

48 states have magnet schools

ENROLLMENT

About **4%** of all school-age children are in magnet schools.

Magnet Students

IMPACT

Study results are somewhat mixed. Some show higher performance while others show similar results for magnet and non-magnet students.

IMPACT



Several studies have shown higher graduation rates for magnet students, especially for those in Career Academies — career focused high school programs.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

DEFINITION

Charter Schools

Public schools with some autonomy in exchange for having to periodically renew their charter. Charter schools have open enrollment, cannot charge tuition, and must meet local, state & federal accountability standards.

STATE POLICY

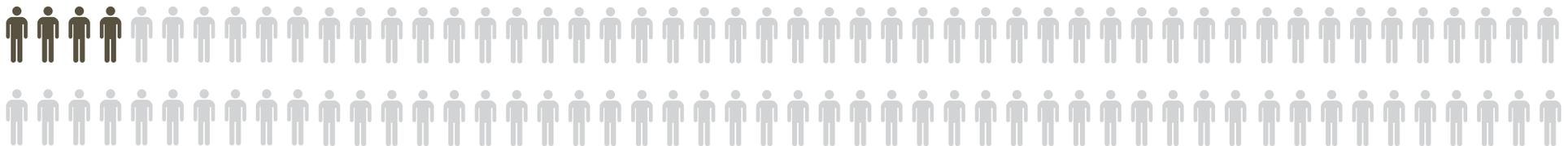
44 states have charter schools

School boards are the largest group of charter school authorizers.

ENROLLMENT

Charters serve about **4%** of all school-age children.

Charter Students

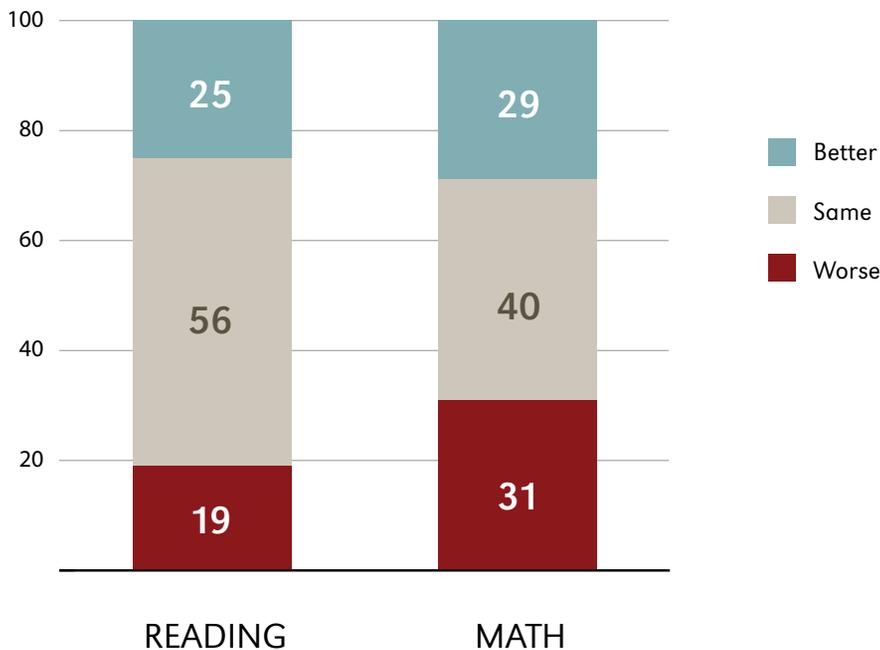
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

IMPACT

Charter Schools

1 in 4 charter schools outperformed its traditional counterpart in reading. More than half performed about the same.

Charter Schools Performance Compared To Traditional Public School Counterpart



A 2015 CREDO analysis of urban charter schools tells a different story. More than half of charter schools in urban districts overall outperformed their traditional public school counterpart. The impact was highest in Boston, Newark and Memphis. Conversely, urban charter schools in Las Vegas and West Palm beach performed worse.

Source: CREDO, 2013

PRIVATE SCHOOLS

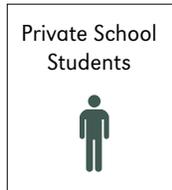
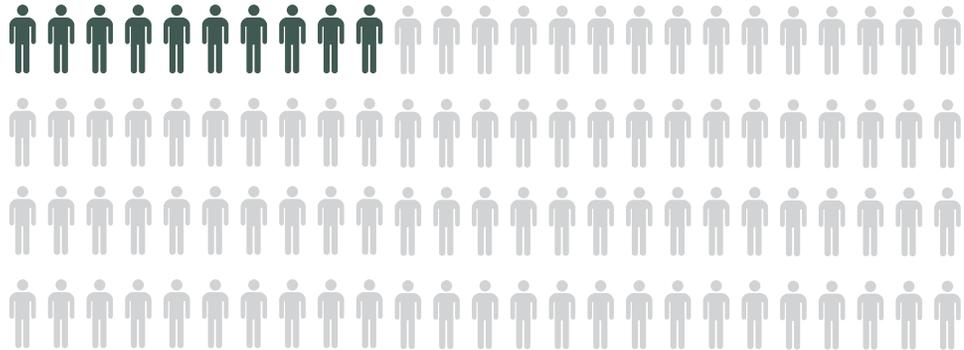
DEFINITION

Private Schools

Not free. Selective. Not open to every student.
No public accountability for student performance.

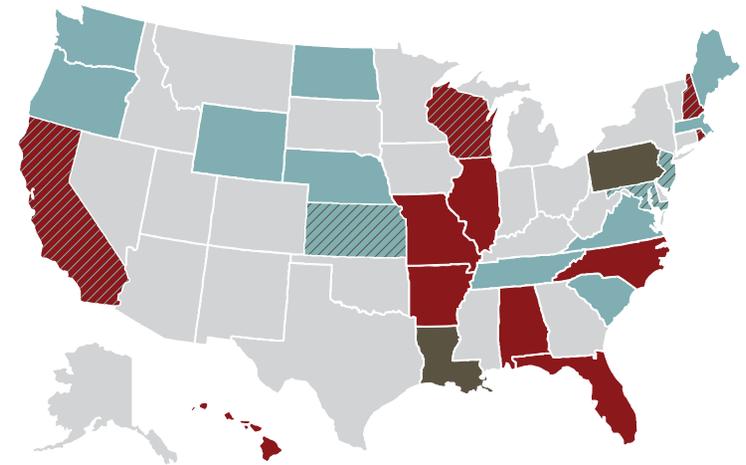
ENROLLMENT

Enroll about **10%** of total school-aged population, which has been consistent for the last four decades.



STATE POLICY

- States that require private schools to register with state Department of Education
- States that require registration for specific private schools
- States that allow private schools to be recognized by state Board of Education



Source: US Department of Education, 2009

IMPACT

Private school students score somewhat higher on NAEP than their public school peers, but the gap has been narrowing.

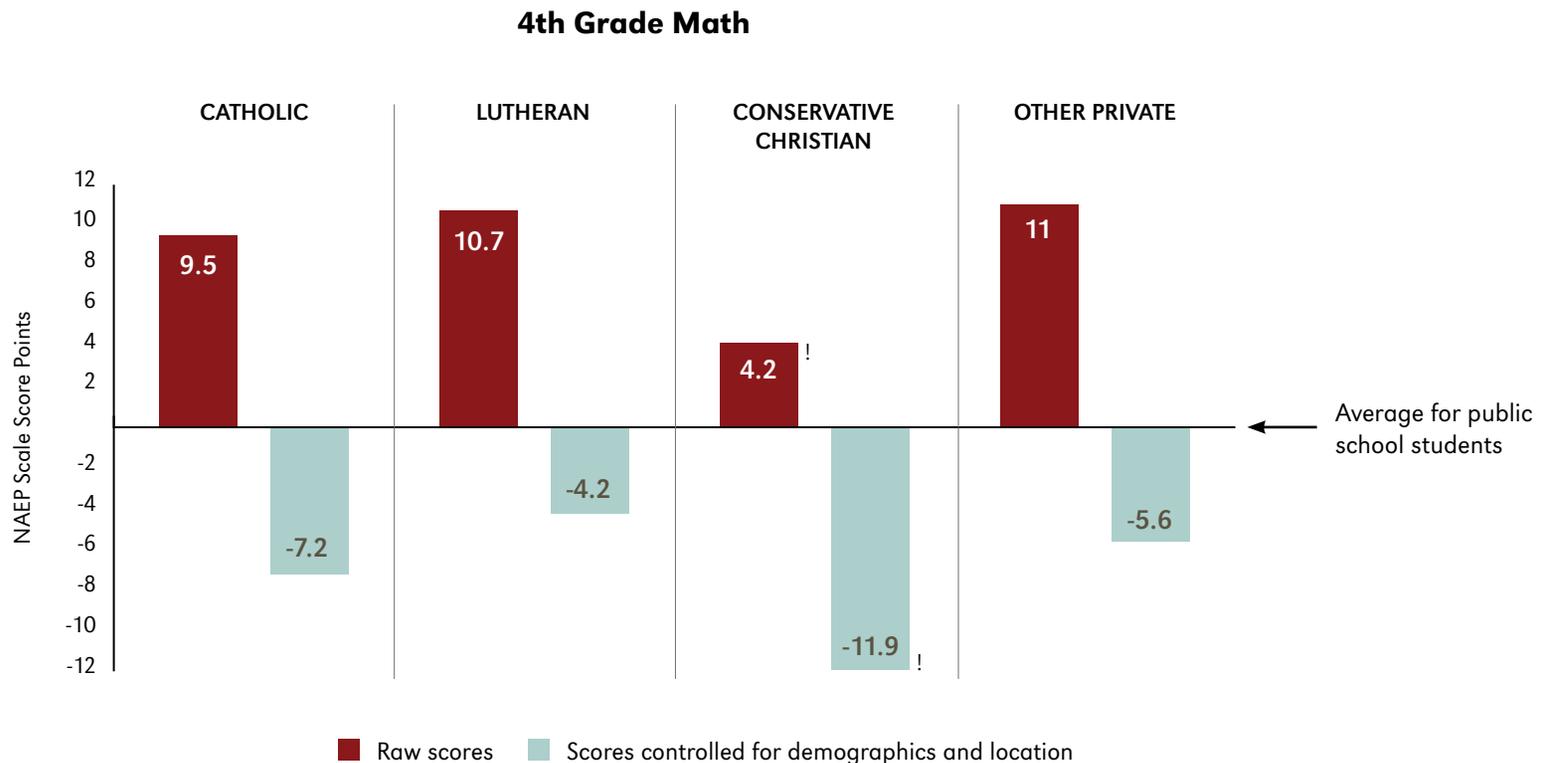
PRIVATE SCHOOLS

IMPACT

Private Schools

Public Versus Private School Performance

Private school students tend to outperform public school students on NAEP. But when researchers Lubienski & Lubienski controlled for student race, ethnicity & family income, they found the opposite – that in most cases, 4th and 8th grade public school students had the advantage in math scores over students in different kinds of private schools.



! Not statistically significant; interpret with caution

PRIVATE SCHOOLS

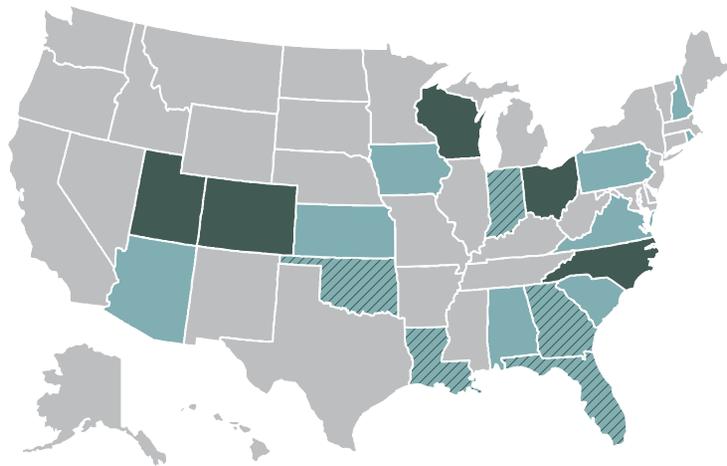
DEFINITION

Vouchers & Tuition Tax Credits

Taxpayer-funded scholarships that subsidize student tuition at private schools. Typically available to targeted groups, such as low-income students, those attending chronically low-performing schools, students with disabilities, or students in foster care.

STATE POLICY

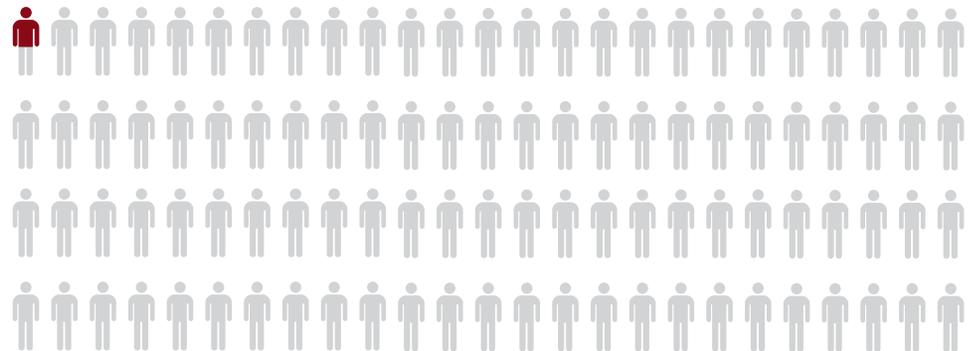
- Offer vouchers
- Offer tuition tax credits
- Offers both



ENROLLMENT

Voucher students comprise less than **1/2 of 1%** of all school-age children.

Voucher Students

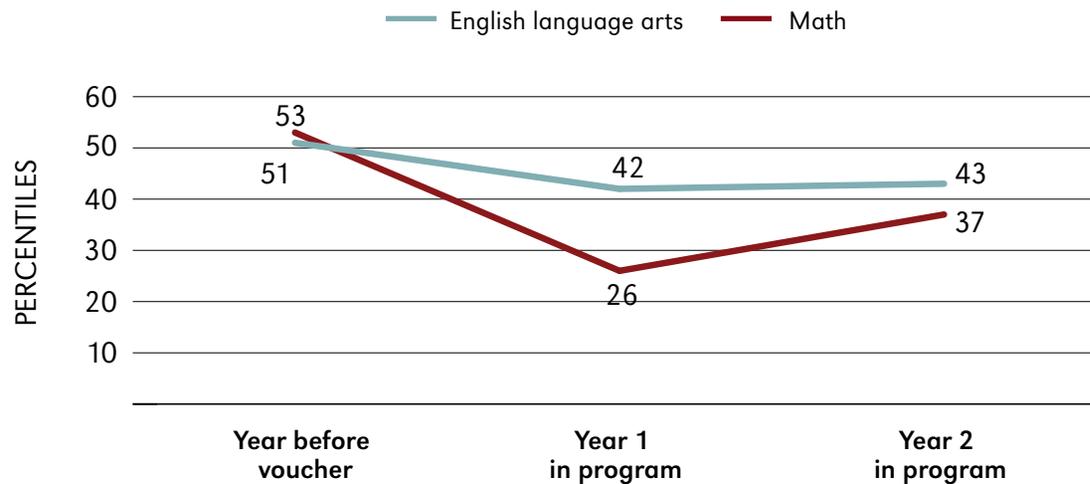


PRIVATE SCHOOLS

IMPACT

Vouchers & Tuition Tax Credits

Impact of Vouchers on Student Achievement After 2 years



Source: Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2015

A major study of the Louisiana voucher program showed that public school students who used the voucher to enter a private school in 2011-12 were found to have lost academic ground two years later. Declines were evident in both reading and math.

Some studies report test score gains for low-income, African American students; most show similar performance as public school students for other student groups.



Several studies have found voucher recipients are more likely to graduate from high school.

Accountability varies greatly by program; **20** require participating students to take standardized assessments while **18** have no accountability for student performance.

HOMESCHOOLING

DEFINITION

Homeschooling

Students are taught at home by parents or tutors who determine content; virtual schooling can be a part of instruction.

STATE POLICY

13 states & DC have requirements for homeschool instructors; some require certain subjects

23 states & DC require testing for homeschooled students

14 states define performance thresholds

ENROLLMENT

Homeschoolers comprise **3%** of the total school-aged population.

Homeschool Students



HOMESCHOOLING

IMPACT

Homeschooling

**IMPACT UNKNOWN**

There is little reliable research on homeschooled students; consequently, little is known about them as a group.

Most studies are anecdotal or based on self-selected, self-reporting surveys.

Some small studies suggest higher SAT/ACT scores and college-going rates for home schooled students; how well these studies represent homeschoolers overall is unknown.

VIRTUAL SCHOOLS

DEFINITION

Virtual Schools

Either public or private online schools. Can be either fully virtual or “blend” online & face to face instruction. Courses are purchased from private providers or developed by states and school districts.

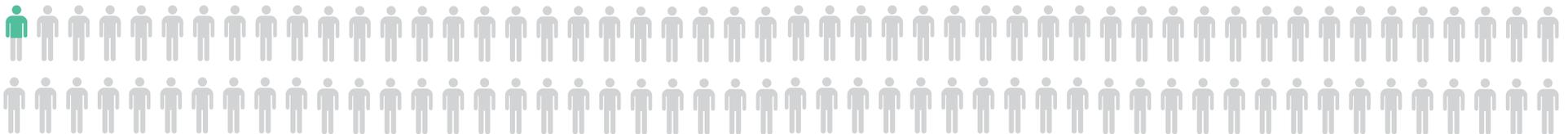
STATE POLICY

30 states & DC operate virtual schools

ENROLLMENT

Enrollments are growing but currently serve less than **1/2** of **1%** of total school-age population.

Virtual Students

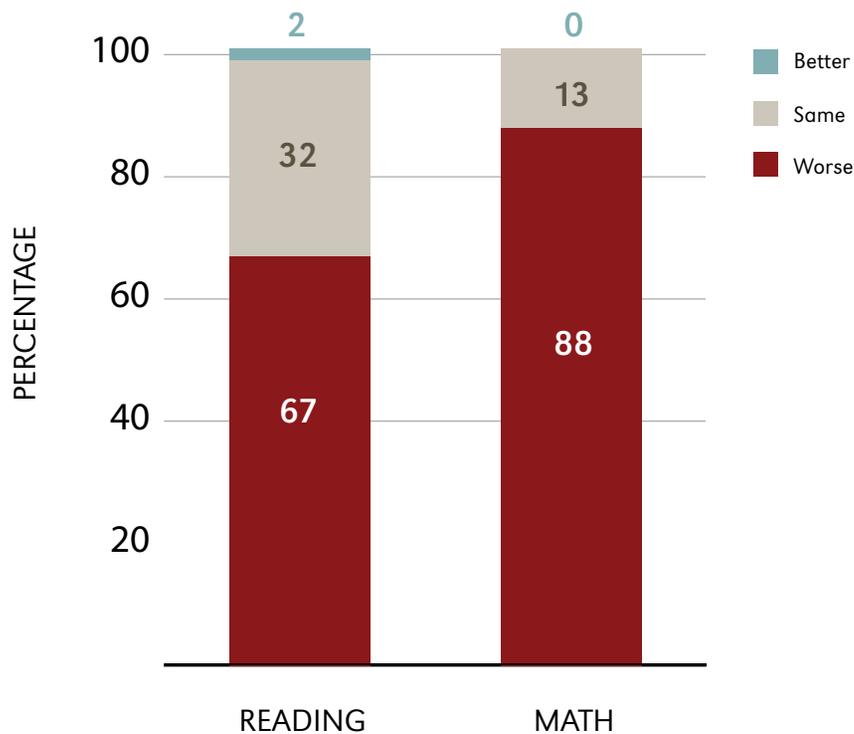



VIRTUAL SCHOOLS

IMPACT

Virtual Schools

Online Charter Schools Compared to Traditional Public Schools



Source: CREDO, 2015



On-time graduation rates for full-time virtual schools are about half the national average



Studies suggest that students taking AP or other high-level courses online do well



Credit recovery is the most common reason students take online courses, but the overall effect is hard to determine.

Other Forms of School Choice

- **Inter- and Intra-district transfers:** Over 20 states allow students to transfer within or between school districts to other public schools. The combination of inter- and intra-district transfers with magnet and charter school enrollments shows that about 16% of school-age children attend a public school of their choice.
- **Education Savings Accounts:** Education Savings Accounts (ESA) are similar to vouchers in that qualifying families receive a portion of state funds for educating their child. They differ in that the dollars are deposited in a privately managed account and can be used for tutoring, curriculum and other approved services as well as for private school tuition.

Arizona and Florida were the first states to initiate small-scale ESA programs for special needs students. Arizona also offers ESAs to students in low-performing schools. In 2015, Nevada passed an ESA bill that represents the most far-reaching school choice program in the nation. According to the bill, Nevada will provide a large part of the state per-pupil allocation in the form of an ESA to students who are currently enrolled in the state's public schools but wish to leave. Experts estimate that about 93% of all school-age children would be eligible to participate. The Nevada Supreme Court recently called a permanent injunction against the program due to its funding mechanism. However, ESA advocates intend to introduce new legislation in 2017 that will re-launch the program with alternative funding.

Take-aways

- **There's no reason to conclude that choice in itself will produce better outcomes.** While many schools of choice do an exemplary job, the results aren't universally better than those produced by traditional public schools.
- **Non-public school choice should come with warning labels.** Policymakers who are considering supporting parents who wish to choose private schools or homeschooling should be aware that very little is known about the overall efficacy of schooling outside of public schools.
- **Expanding charter schools is not an overall reform strategy.** Most charter schools are no better than their traditional public school counterparts. Merely having more of them will not raise performance. Rather, policymakers and educators should focus on learning from successful charter schools about policies and practices that can help improve all schools.

What Can School Boards Do?

- Establish opportunities for sharing lessons learned between your traditional, magnet and charter schools. Learning from successes in your various programs can bolster the education provided all students in your district.
- Provide an adequate infrastructure for monitoring your students in virtual schools. Digital learning is the wave of the future and will have a central place in public education. But school boards need to make sure that it is done right so that students do not get lost in cyberspace.
- Establish policies for granting and revoking charters based on academic performance. Make sure these policies are well-known in order to attract stronger applications.

A Disclosure

The Center for Public Education is an initiative of the National School Boards Association (NSBA). While we have sought to be as objective as possible in this report, readers should be aware that NSBA has official positions on school choice, as follows:

- **Public education choice:** NSBA supports “locally elected school boards in expanding public school choices to meet the needs of students in a rapidly changing world.” This support extends to charter schools as long as the local school board “retains sole authority” to grant and revoke charters.
- **Non-public education choice:** NSBA “recognizes and upholds the right of any group to establish and maintain schools so long as such schools are fully financed by their own supporters.” At the same time, NSBA believes public tax dollars should “only support public schools” and opposes “vouchers, tax credits, and tax subsidies for use at non-public K-12 schools.” NSBA further believes that “private and home schools should be subject to governmental regulation that assures a minimum standard of instruction under state law and adherence to the Constitution and laws of the United States.”

Acknowledgments

We want to thank Patricia Campbell, CPE’s Spring 2014 intern, for her contribution to this report.

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The Center for Public Education is a national resource for credible and practical information about public education and its importance to the well-being of our nation. CPE provides up-to-date research, data, and analysis on current education issues and explores ways to improve student achievement and engage public support for public schools. CPE is an initiative of the National School Boards Association.

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Founded in 1940, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) is a not-for-profit organization representing state associations of school boards and their more than 90,000 local school board members throughout the U.S. Working with and through our state associations, NSBA advocates for equity and excellence in public education through school board leadership. www.nsba.org

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