



EDUCATION CHOICE OVERVIEW

ExcelinEd Policy Toolkit - 2020

“Education choice creates opportunity for families by allowing them to choose the best educational fits for their children...The philosophy of education choice is the belief that every child deserves access to a quality education.”

Every child deserves access to a quality education that provides the knowledge, skills and values necessary to prepare them for a successful career and fulfilling life. Unfortunately, many children are residentially assigned to schools that don't fit their unique needs and learning styles. American education is designed around school buildings, drawing district lines around those buildings, and assigning students to schools based on whether they live within those lines. For many parents, the only choice available to them is to relocate to a new community – an option out of reach for millions of families without the resources to pick up and move.

The philosophy of education choice is the belief that every child deserves access to a quality education that fits their needs. Education choice includes public, private, and non-traditional schooling options like open enrollment public schools, public charter schools, magnet schools, home schooling, online learning, vouchers, tax-credit scholarships and education scholarship accounts (ESAs).¹

PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE

Open Enrollment

Open enrollment allows students to attend public schools outside of their residentially assigned attendance zone. Forty-six states, plus Washington, D.C., have open enrollment policies.²

- **Voluntary vs. Mandatory:** Open enrollment may be voluntary or mandatory at the state or district level. Voluntary policies *allow* schools or districts to decide if they will accept students who live outside their boundaries. Mandatory policies *require* all districts to provide students the option to transfer and to accept students who request transfer. Restrictions on mandatory policies may include opt-out provisions, priorities for allowing transfer or desegregation provisions.
- **Intra-district vs. Inter-district:** *Intra*-district policies allow students to request admission to a school outside their residentially assigned attendance zone within the same district. *Inter*-district policies allow students to apply to schools across district boundaries within the same state.

Public Charter Schools

Public charter schools are tuition-free public schools open to all students. If a school is oversubscribed, it must conduct a blind admissions lottery to enroll applying students. These schools are held to state academic and financial standards and are run independently of school districts. They operate under a performance contract with an authorizer, like a district, the state, a university or another approved entity.

¹ Some states offer a lot of choice. For example, Step Up For Students [reports](#) that of the 3.7 million PreK-12 students in Florida, 46 percent of them (~1.7 million) attended a school of their choice during the 2016-17 school year.

² According to the [Education Commission of States](#), the only states that do not address open enrollment in state policy are Alabama, Illinois, Maryland and North Carolina.



The majority of charter schools are stand-alone schools that were started by parents and community organizers to address local and specific problems. There is wide variety among charters: schools for students with special needs, schools that focus on STEM or the arts, schools for students experiencing the challenges of homelessness, schools that partner with local businesses and more.³

PRIVATE EDUCATION CHOICE

Interest in private education choice programs has skyrocketed in recent years. Between 2012-2019, 27 private choice programs were enacted and enrollment in choice programs more than doubled: from 210,000 students in 2012 to more than 500,000 students in 2019. Today, there are more than 55 programs in about half of the states.

Vouchers

Vouchers were the first form of private education choice, originally enacted in 1990 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The concept is simple, and something that had been practiced in higher education for generations: instead of sending funding directly to schools, fund a child and let them take the funds to any eligible school of their choice.⁴

Tax-Credit Scholarships

Tax-credit scholarships were created as an alternative to voucher programs. While the end result is the same—a scholarship to attend private school—tax-credit scholarships are *funded* differently. Instead of using public funds, these programs incentivize individuals and businesses to donate private funds to a non-profit organization that provides tuition scholarships to eligible students.

In exchange for their donations, donors receive a tax credit from the state—usually a 100 percent, dollar-for-dollar credit. Through this process, tax-credit scholarship programs use entirely private funds and have consistently held up against lawsuits claiming that they utilize public funds.⁵

Education Scholarship Accounts (ESAs)

Through an ESA program, parents can sign up to have their child's education funding deposited into an account that they can use for multiple educational uses, including the ability to save for future K-12 and college expenses. ESAs create a system of education that is truly customized for each child.

Under a system of state oversight, parents can direct ESA funds towards any combination of educational uses, including: private school tuition, tutoring, educational therapies, curriculum, contracted public school courses, online courses and programs and summer education programs.⁶

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

For more information about education choice, see additional resources on the [ExcelinEd website](#). Contact Cara Candal (Cara@ExcelinEd.org), Tim Abram (Tim@ExcelinEd.org), or Sam Duell (Sam@ExcelinEd.org) with questions.

³ Today, 44 states and Washington, D.C., allow charter schools, and more than 3 million students in America attend charter schools. That's about 6 percent of all public school students.

⁴ There are currently 23 voucher programs in 13 states and Washington, D.C.

⁵ There are currently 21 tax-credit scholarship programs in 17 states.

⁶ There are operational ESA programs in five states: Arizona (est. 2011), Florida (2014), Mississippi (2015), Tennessee (2015), and North Carolina (2017). A sixth program, in Nevada, was enacted in 2015 but has not been funded.