
WHO'S AFRAID OF SCHOOL CHOICE?

SECOND EDITION: Examining the intensity of
anti-school choice rhetoric

Jason Bedrick (The Heritage Foundation)

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ABOUT EDCHOICE

EdChoice is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, nonpartisan organization. Our mission is to advance educational freedom and choice for all as a pathway to successful lives and a stronger society. We are committed to understanding and pursuing a K–12 education ecosystem that empowers every family to choose the learning environment that fits their children’s needs best. EdChoice is the intellectual legacy of Milton and Rose D. Friedman, who founded the organization in 1996 as the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. The contents of this publication are intended to provide empirical information and should not be construed as lobbying for any position related to any legislation.

This is the second edition of this report.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Opponents of education choice recycle the same false prophecies of doom without regard to the evidence or the size and scope of the proposals.

For decades, the most common objection to education choice policies has been that they will “destroy public education.” According to the critics, choice policies will induce the parents most interested in education to leave the district school system, leading to significant financial losses and declining academic performance. These predictions of financial and academic disaster have not materialized, however. In states with the oldest and largest education choice programs, inflation-adjusted per-pupil funding has increased, and the average performance of district schools is at least as good as it was when the choice policies were first enacted. Indeed, the overwhelming conclusion of the research literature is that education choice policies have modest but statistically significant *positive effects* on district school performance.

The first iteration of this report explored whether the intensity of choice opponents’ rhetoric varied based on the size and scope of the choice proposal at hand. After analyzing the rhetoric during debates over the education choice legislation enacted in five states in 2021, we concluded that choice opponents’ pessimistic predictions did not vary in intensity based on the size or scope of the proposal. Whether the proposals were modest or expansive, the rhetorical intensity of school choice opponents was about the same.

This follow-up report extends that analysis by analyzing the rhetoric used during debates over the education choice legislation enacted in eight states—Alabama, Arkansas, Iowa, Louisiana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Utah—in 2023 and 2024. We again conclude that choice opponents’ rhetorical intensity did not vary based on the size or scope of the proposal.

INTRODUCTION

“This is the day that will go down in the annals of Florida history as the day we abandoned the public schools and the day that we abandoned, more importantly, our children.”

– Florida Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz
(March 25, 1999)

“The top-ranking states across the four [NAEP] tests, adjusted for demographics, are Massachusetts, Mississippi, Florida, Louisiana, and Texas.”

– Urban Institute (December 2024)

For decades, opponents of education choice have played the role of Chicken Little, claiming the sky was falling whenever a state legislator proposed creating a new voucher, tax-credit scholarship, or K–12 education savings account (ESA) program. Although the devastation they predicted never materialized, the prophets of doom persist in assuring us that *this time* enacting education choice really will usher in the academic apocalypse.

Decades ago, when education choice policies were new and untested, such concerns were understandable, if overwrought. All reforms entail some uncertainty and risk, and caution—especially concerning the well-being of children—is sensible.

What is not sensible, however, is to continue making predictions about the effects of a *longstanding* policy without assessing its real-life performance. A doctor who expresses concern that a new medication may carry the risk of certain side effects might be appropriately cautious. But if a medication has passed numerous clinical trials and has been on the market for decades without causing harm, the person ranting about its supposed dangers without regard to its actual performance is considered a quack.

We have reached the point at which it is no longer sensible to prognosticate education choice policies while ignoring their actual performance. Several states—such as Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin—have had robust education choice options for at least one or two decades, and much can be learned from analyzing their experiences. Indeed, it would be irresponsible not to do so.

The first iteration of this report assessed the validity of the two most common predictions of choice critics: (1) that choice policies will lead to less funding for district schools, and (2) that choice policies will lead to a significant—even catastrophic—reduction in student achievement at the district schools. As the report detailed, neither prediction came to pass. Per-pupil spending in states with robust choice programs has risen over the last two decades, even after adjusting for

TABLE 1

Effects of School Choice on Public School Students' Test Scores

Author(s)	Location	Program Type	Year	Any Positive Effect	No Visible Effect	Any Negative Effect
Lavertu and Gregg	Ohio	V	2022	✓		
Canbolat	Indiana	V	2021			X
Egalite and Mills	Louisiana	V	2021	✓		
Egalite and Catt	Indiana	V	2020	✓		
Figlio and Karbownik	Ohio	V	2016	✓		
Bowen and Trivitt	Florida	V	2014			X
Chakrabarti	Florida	V	2013	✓		
Carr	Ohio	V	2011	✓		
Winters and Greene	Florida	V	2011	✓		
Mader	Milwaukee, WI	V	2010	✓		
Greene and Marsh	Milwaukee, WI	V	2009	✓		
Chakrabarti	Milwaukee, WI	V	2008	✓		
Forster	Ohio	V	2008	✓		
Forster	Florida	V	2008	✓		
Carnoy et al.	Milwaukee, WI	V	2007	✓		
Greene and Winters	Washington, D.C.	V	2007		○	
Figlio and Rouse	Florida	V	2006	✓		
West and Peterson	Florida	V	2006	✓		
Greene and Winters	Florida	V	2004	✓		
Greene and Forster	Milwaukee, WI	V	2002	✓		
Hammons	Maine	V	2002	✓		
Hammons	Vermont	V	2002	✓		
Hoxby	Milwaukee, WI	V	2002	✓		
Greene	Florida	V	2001	✓		
Figlio et al.	Florida	TCS	2023	✓		
Figlio and Hart	Florida	TCS	2014	✓		
Rouse et al.	Florida	TCS	2013	✓		
Gray, Merrifield, and Adzima	San Antonio, TX	P	2016	✓		
Greene and Forster	San Antonio, TX	P	2002	✓		

V=Voucher; TCS=Tax-credit scholarship; P=Private scholarship

Notes: This table shows all empirical studies using all methods. If a study's analysis produced any positive or negative results or both, we classify those studies as positive, negative or both. Studies that did not produce any statistically significant results for any subgroup are classified as "no visible effect."

inflation. Likewise, standardized test scores in the robust choice states are generally improving. Education choice programs deliver modest but statistically significant improvements to district schools, according to the research literature (Table 1).

Despite the predictions of the school choice Chicken Littles, the sky is not falling.

Rhetorical Intensity and Reality

The sky has not fallen, but the Chicken Littles still squawk, and the intensity of their squawking is not proportional to the size or scope of school choice proposals. A previous iteration of this report analyzed the rhetoric employed by choice opponents during the debates over education choice policies enacted by five states—Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri, New Hampshire, and West Virginia—in 2021. The size and scope of the policies in those states varied considerably, with the maximum participation ranging from less than 0.1% of the state’s total K–12 student population to 93%. Statements concerning the effects of the choice proposals on the district school system were then rated on a 10-point scale, ranging from “mild concern” (2) to “catastrophic” (10) with a bonus level (11) of “apocalyptic.” The report found no relationship between the expansiveness of the education choice proposal and the intensity of the anti-choice rhetoric. Opponents were just as likely to use inflammatory rhetoric predicting the “end of public education,” whether the program might end up enrolling nine out of 10 students or less than one in 1,000.

This follow-up report extends that inquiry by analyzing the rhetoric employed by choice opponents during the debates over education choice policies enacted by eight states—Alabama, Arkansas, Iowa, Louisiana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Utah—in 2023 and 2024. The policies these states enacted vary greatly. Some create programs that will, after a few years, be open

to all K–12 students. Two states will fund every eligible student who applies. By contrast, other states limit eligibility, based on household income and appropriation limits. Consequently, student participation rates across the eight states will range from less than 0.5% of its total K–12 student population to (potentially) 100%.

This report, consistent with the previous one, found that opponents of modest programs were just as likely as opponents of expansive ones to use heated rhetoric. Regardless of a policy’s specifics, it seems the sky is always falling.

METHODOLOGY

We analyzed the rhetoric used by opponents of new education choice policies enacted in 2023 and 2024 in eight states. These included the new ESA and ESA-style policies in Alabama (HB 129), Arkansas (SB 294), Iowa (HF 68), Louisiana (SB 313), Oklahoma (HB 1934), South Carolina (SB 39), and Utah (HB 215), as well as tax-credit scholarship and voucher policies enacted in Nebraska (LB 753 and LB 1402). As described below, we divided these states into three tiers based on the relative expansiveness of each proposal’s eligibility and funding. We then used artificial intelligence to compile relevant quotations from opponents of the choice proposals in each state. Finally, we scored the rhetorical intensity of the anti-choice statements.

State Tiers

The eight states’ policies varied greatly in their size and scope. The most expansive new ones were in Arkansas and Iowa, both of which make 100% of K–12 students eligible, after a three-year phase-in, and provide them funding via a formula, which means that there will be funding available for every eligible student who applies to participate. We have deemed these “Tier 1” states.

We categorized Louisiana and Oklahoma as “Tier 2” states. While all their students are eligible for the new programs, neither state financed them through its funding formula. In Oklahoma, legislators appropriated \$100 million in tax credits, which would allow only 4.2% of students to participate. In Louisiana, legislators chose to wait to decide how much to allocate in appropriations to their new program. They also left the amount of per-pupil funding up to the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. The uncertainty means that the number of students who benefit could be very small.

The final category, “Tier 3,” is reserved for states with highly restricted student eligibility: Alabama, Utah, South Carolina, and Nebraska. Alabama and Utah both make all K–12 students eligible for their education choice policies by year 3, but their programs have severely limited funding. Consequently, just 1.9% of Alabama students and 1.4% of Utah students will be able to participate. South Carolina’s program is set to be open to students from 400% of the Federal Poverty Line (71% of students) after a three-year phase-in period. But funding limits in current law restrict scholarships to a tiny portion of students: 0.6% in year one and 1.9% by year three. While the legislature provided scholarships to pay any private educational costs, the South Carolina Supreme Court has prohibited use of scholarships to pay private school tuition even as it allows use of scholarships for a la carte educational services.

Nebraska enacted two school choice policies in as many years, with a voucher enacted in 2024 the more expansive of the two. Nevertheless, Nebraska lawmakers limited eligibility for its (since-repealed) voucher program to students from families earning up to 555% of the Federal Poverty Line, although it gave priority to lower-income families. First-time scholarship recipients would have had to be switching out of a public school, entering kindergarten or ninth grade, a new resident of the state, or the child of an active-duty member of the U.S. military. About 87 % of K–12 students would have been eligible. However, due to limited funding, only about 0.4% of K–12 students would have been able to participate.

Three other states enacted new education choice policies in the period covered by this report, but we excluded them from our analysis. Georgia and Montana enacted new ESA programs, but they are limited to students with special needs, which means the debates about them cannot be directly compared to debates about policies that serve a broader population. Georgia and Montana also both already have tax-credit scholarship policies that are open to all K–12 students. This paper also excludes the new ESA in Wyoming (HB 166) because changes to its funding and eligibility rules mean it is hard to accurately assign to one of the three categories we use for classifying states.

TABLE 2 Maximum Participation

State	Bill	Funding Per Scholarship (Minimum)	Total Funding (Year 1)	Max Students (Year 1)	Total K–12 Students (Fall 2024)	Max % Participation (Share of K–12 students)
Arkansas	SB 294	\$6,672	Determined by Formula	all	492,100	100%
Iowa	HF 68	\$7,413	Determined by Formula	all	511,400	100%
Louisiana	SB 313	TBD	TBD	TBD	667,100	TBD
Oklahoma	HB 1934	\$5,000	\$150,000,000	30,000	708,500	4.2%
Alabama	HB 129	\$7,000	\$100,000,000	14,286	762,400	1.9%
Nebraska	LB 1402	\$8,584	\$10,000,000	1,165	329,900	0.4%
South Carolina	SB 39	\$6,000	\$30,000,000	5,000	793,500	0.6%
Utah	HB 215	\$8,000	\$80,000,000	10,000	699,900	1.4%

Compiling Anti-Choice Statements

We used artificial intelligence developed by Technology for Freedom to compile statements made in legislative committee testimony, floor speeches, media interviews, press releases, op-eds, and editorials. The AI initially found 3,339 relevant quotations made during the period in which various proposals were being debated and voted upon.

We then filtered out all quotations that were not relevant to our analysis. For example, we limited our analysis to assertions that a proposal would have negative effects on the district school system, so we eliminated any quotations that contained purely philosophical objections, concerns about constitutionality, the effects on participating students, or other issues. We also filtered out all positive statements, as well as duplicates, multiple different quotes from the same individual, and quotes from other states or national outlets that merely referenced a state that falls within our analysis. After this filtering process, we were left with 183 quotations across the eight states.

Measuring Anti-Choice Rhetorical Intensity

We then measured the rhetorical intensity of each statement using a 10-point scale of concern from “mild” to “catastrophic,” with a bonus level 11 in the spirit of Spinal Tap (“these go to 11”) for “apocalyptic” rhetoric. The relevant comments and their scores are included in the appendix. The AI scored each quote three times and provided the average. We then reviewed all the scores and adjusted them as necessary to ensure that they aligned with our scale of anti-choice rhetorical intensity.

Scale of Anti-Choice Rhetorical Intensity

(2) Mild: Concerns about potential negative effects that should be monitored but do not rise to the level that the policy should be opposed.

(4) Moderate: Temperately stated concerns about likely negative effects, particularly on funding streams.

(6) Strong: Strongly worded concerns about likely negative effects, particularly on funding streams (e.g., siphon or divert).

(8) Severe: Strongly worded concerns that the policy will significantly disrupt district school operations (e.g., drain, harm, weaken, diminish, erode, or undercut).

(10) Catastrophic: Alarmist claims that the policy will fundamentally undermine the ability of district schools to function (e.g., degrade, cripple, hobble, deplete, attack, or privatize).

(11) Apocalyptic: Alarmist claims that the policy will lead to the destruction of public education (e.g., destroy, dismantle, eliminate, or cause the end of public education).

TABLE 3

Anti-Choice Rhetorical Intensity Scores by State and Speaker Category

	State (% Max Participation)								
	Tier 1		Tier 2		Tier 3				
	Arkansas (100%)	Iowa (100%)	Louisiana (TBD)	Oklahoma (4.2%)	Alabama (1.9%)	Nebraska (0.4%)	South Carolina (0.6%)	Utah (1.4%)	Average
Concerned Citizens	6.7	7.6	7.8	6.0	8.4	8.4	11.0	6.5	7.8
District School Personnel	7.4	7.0	7.4	10.0	6.7	8.0	10.0	7.3	8.0
Interest Groups	9.0	7.0	6.3	8.0	8.5	8.1	8.0	8.3	7.9
Policymakers	6.8	7.6	5.4	7.0	7.4	6.6	8.3	6.5	6.9
Average (across categories)	7.5	7.3	6.7	7.8	7.8	7.8	9.3	7.1	7.7
Average (overall)	7.5	7.4	7.0	7.7	7.4	7.8	9.0	7.2	7.6
Average (across categories)	7.4		7.2		8.0				
Average (overall)	7.4		7.2		7.6				

FINDINGS: ANTI-CHOICE RHETORICAL INTENSITY SCORES

We classified those who made statements against education choice into four categories: policymakers, district school personnel, interest groups, and concerned citizens. (This last category replaces the “commentators” category from our original analysis.) The Policymakers category is primarily made up of state legislators but can also include governors or other elected or appointed public officials, such as the head of the state education agency. District School Personnel includes teachers, principals, superintendents, and other staff and administrators, as well as the unions and associations that represent them. Interest Groups include think tanks, advocacy organizations, public interest law firms, and other organizations that seek to influence public policy (excluding those in the District School Personnel category). Concerned Citizens include journalists, columnists, thought leaders, bloggers, and ordinary citizens who shared their views in legislative testimony, letters to the editor, or to reporters.

In Table 3, we provide a rhetorical intensity score, which is the average of all statements within a particular category of speaker. We then provide two aggregate scores for each state: one average across the scores for each of the four categories of speakers, and one average across all the statements we scored.

The most obvious takeaway from our analysis is that, as in our previous analysis, there is no relationship between the expansiveness of the education choice proposal and the intensity of the anti-choice rhetoric. In other words, opponents of school choice do not moderate their rhetorical intensity based on the size and scope of the school choice proposal. It doesn’t matter whether the proposal would offer school choice to all students or to very few students—opponents of school choice will claim that the proposal will harm public schools, and some will even claim that it will destroy public schools.

Indeed, the rhetorical intensity of choice opponents in two of the states with especially modest proposals (Alabama and South Carolina, which have maximum enrollment of only 1.9% and 0.6% of K–12 students, respectively) generally exceeded that of the rhetoric in states (Arkansas and Iowa) whose policies could extend to 100% of enrolled K–12 students. The reader may get a sense of the level of rhetorical intensity across states (without having to read through the entire appendix), by looking at some typical examples of anti-choice rhetoric from each state:

ALABAMA (8 – Severe)

“The stakes could not be higher when it comes to defeating vouchers/school choice. Funding drained from our local schools means fewer math and reading coaches, cuts to extracurricular activities, loss of STEM programs, and, in extreme cases, reductions in force.”

– Amy H. Marlowe, Alabama Education Association⁴

ARKANSAS (8 – Severe)

“This legislation will undoubtedly drain resources from our public schools.”

– Olivia Gardner, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families⁵

IOWA (8 – Severe)

“I believe the effects will be harmful to all public students, students who come from marginalized groups and lower social economic conditions, in particular.”

– State Sen. Molly Donahue⁶

LOUISIANA (6 – Strong)

“All the other things we fund with tax dollars could be crowded out.”

– Jane Moller, Invest in Louisiana⁷

NEBRASKA (8 – Severe)

“LB 1402 will lead to funding cuts that will weaken Nebraska’s public schools, will hurt kids, and will particularly harm our rural communities.”

– Support Our Schools Nebraska⁸

OKLAHOMA (8 – Severe)

“Vouchers weaken public education by draining money and resources away from the 90% of Oklahoma children who attend public schools.”

– Oklahoma Education Association⁹

SOUTH CAROLINA (8 – Severe)

“By diverting funds that would otherwise go into the general coffers, this bill will diminish the quality of life for South Carolina’s most vulnerable citizens.”

– Dr. Janelle Rivers, League of Women Voters¹⁰

UTAH (8 – Severe)

“HB 215 fails to support students and weakens public education by redirecting public funds to private institutions without any safeguards, protections against discrimination and transparency.”

– Utah Senate Democrats¹¹

Moreover, as shown in the appendix, each state's proposal had at least one policymaker, district school representative, interest group, or concerned citizen "go to 11" with their apocalyptic predictions. For example:

ALABAMA (11 – Apocalyptic)

"[I]f you want to decapitate public education, at least say it, so we'll know how to deal with that."

– State Sen. Kirk Hatcher¹²

ARKANSAS (11 – Apocalyptic)

"LEARNS will dismantle and defund our public schools through a voucher system that has not worked anywhere ever."

– State Rep. Tippi McCullough, House Minority Leader¹³

IOWA (11 – Apocalyptic)

"The governor's private school voucher scheme poses an existential threat to Iowa's public education system."

– State Sen. Zach Wahls¹⁴

LOUISIANA (11 – Apocalyptic)

"ESAs are an abandonment of public education. There's no other way to put it."

– State Sen. Royce Duplessis¹⁵

NEBRASKA (11 – Apocalyptic)

"[Rural] schools now face a new threat—a proposed voucher program that risks starving them of vital public funding."

– Allen Pratt, National Rural Education Association¹⁶

OKLAHOMA (11 – Apocalyptic)

"HB 1934 - the Parental Choice Tax Credit bill—is the latest installment of the Republican voucher scheme in attempts to dismantle public education in the State of Oklahoma."

– Oklahoma Senate Democrats¹⁷

SOUTH CAROLINA (11 – Apocalyptic)

"This is the first step to the death of public education. You will soon have to be calling on my business because of what we are about to do to destroy public education in this state."

– State Rep. John King¹⁸

UTAH (11 – Apocalyptic)

"Conservative lawmakers just robbed our neighborhood schools of \$42 million. Private school vouchers have been and continue to be opposed by Utahns but these lawmakers are instead pursuing a national agenda to 'destroy public education.' As a result, our children, parents, and teachers will suffer as a foundational institution of our society is deprived of much-needed resources."

– Alliance for a Better Utah¹⁹

It's worth reiterating just how divorced from reality these claims are. State Sen. Kirk Hatcher of Alabama claimed that enacting a school choice policy that fewer than 2% of students could use amounts to “decapitating” public education. America has decades of experience with expansive education choice programs in states where the district school systems not only still exist but are also improving. Despite this, Rep. John King of South Carolina claimed that a policy allowing up to 0.6% of his state’s students to use an ESA would be “the first step to the death of public education.” This and other similar statements are simply preposterous.

Unfortunately, overheated rhetoric can sometimes intimidate choice supporters. Supportive lawmakers will sometimes propose more limited legislation in the hopes of reducing the rhetorical temperature of attacks on the proposal. As this analysis and its predecessor demonstrate, however, there is no evidence that moderating a choice proposal by limiting funding or eligibility induces

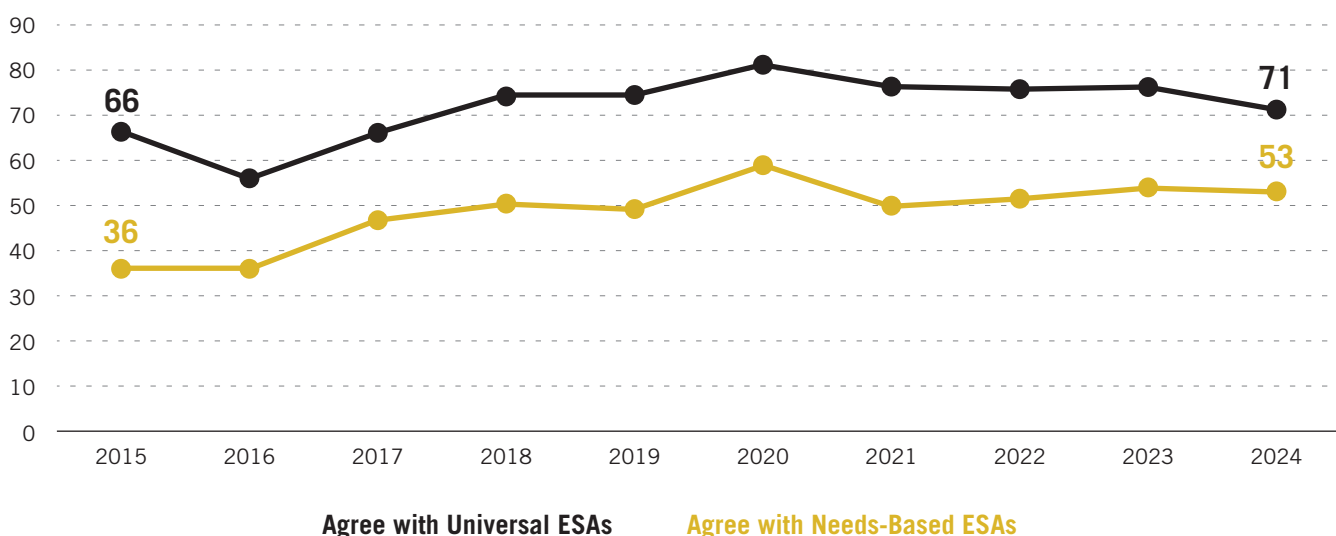
opponents to moderate their rhetoric. Such limitations only limit the appeal of the proposal to the public. As EdChoice’s annual *Schooling in America Survey* has shown, support for universal education choice policies has been consistently higher than support for policies targeted based on need.²⁰

Opponents of education choice tend to throw everything they have against such proposals, regardless of their size and scope. They view modest proposals as merely the proverbial “camel’s nose under the tent,” that must be met with the same forceful opposition as the whole camel. Whether a proposal would be open to all children or fewer than one in 1,000, opponents of choice engage in the same level of rhetorical intensity, predicting that empowering families to choose from a wide variety of educational options will produce only doom and gloom for the district school system. Fortunately for everyone, their predictions have no basis in reality. Advocates of school choice, then, have no reason to be modest in their proposals.

FIGURE 1 UNIVERSAL VS. NEEDS-BASED EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNTS (ESAs), 2015–2024

Americans are consistently much more likely to support universal ESAs rather than needs-based ESAs. However, Americans’ support for universal ESAs dropped five points from last year.

% of Current School Parents by Split Sample



Notes: Phone-only survey results shown for 2015–2017. Mixed-mode results (online and phone) shown for 2018–2024. Volunteered responses not shown nor skips reflected in this chart.
Sources: EdChoice, 2024 *Schooling in America Survey* (conducted April 9–April 30, 2024), Q24; EdChoice, *Schooling in America Survey*, 2016–2024; Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, *Schooling in America Survey*, 2015

CONCLUSION

Opponents of education choice recycle the same false prophecies of doom without regard to the evidence or the scope of the proposals before them. Even after decades of experience with vouchers, ESAs, and other programs, the choice opponents' predictions of disaster have not materialized. Instead, the average district school in states with the most robust education choice environments performs as good or better than it did when the choice policies were enacted. In fact, a mountain of evidence suggests that choice policies have modest but statistically significant positive effects on district school performance. Nevertheless, choice opponents continue to claim "the sky will fall" if state lawmakers enact education choice policies. Moreover, as demonstrated by the results of this report and its predecessor, the choice opponents' pessimistic predictions do not vary in intensity based on the size or scope of the proposal.

Every child should have access to the learning environment that best meets his or her individual learning needs. Policies like education savings accounts could provide that access, so long as state legislators are not cowed by the opponents' faulty forecasting and reckless rhetoric. Policymakers have no reason to believe the fearmongering of the Chicken Littles, nor should they expect that reducing the scope of their proposals will reduce the intensity of opposition. Instead, they should stay the course, be bold, and ensure that every child gets access to the quality education they deserve.

APPENDIX

This appendix includes all the statements that were scored for rhetorical intensity in paper. For each state, the statements are divided into the four categories of speakers that we identified: concerned citizens, district school personnel, interest groups, and policymakers. Within each category, the statements are listed in descending order of rhetorical intensity, along with their assigned score.



To read the appendix, please scan the following code with your phone, or visit infogram.com/whos-afraid-of-school-choice-appendix-1hxj48m13r3152v?live

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The authors take responsibility for any errors, misrepresentations, or omissions in this publication.

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