



Does the school choice movement have a Google problem?

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When someone doesn't know something, Google is one of the first places they turn.

If the average person is unfamiliar with school choice, charter schools or similar terms, what will Google steer them toward? Here's a surface-level examination of what a newcomer might see when they search for various school choice terms.

Notes on methodology: As you may know, Google does an incredible job of customizing search results according to your search and browsing history. To avoid my history tainting the results, I cleared my history and cookies, signed out of my Google Chrome account and even downloaded a plug-in that masks my location.

Instead of Google thinking I live in Washington, D.C., I picked a random location in the middle of the map and ended up with Oberlin, Kan. Not perfect, but it filtered out Washington-specific results I was getting otherwise.

Sponsored results are not included below. News results are included, even though they change frequently. Searches were done without quotation marks around the terms. Keep in mind I had to make a subjective judgement call on what is positive, neutral or negative.

School Choice

Top result: School choice — Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (neutral)

10 positive results, three neutral, two negative. Below Wikipedia, the first result is from EdChoice, the pro-school choice group. Two of the three news results are positive. Negative results from the New York Times and Salon.com show up. But there is an Education Next link to a study that shows school choice reduces crime, as well as two Department of Education links about programs to support school choice.

Overall, a generic search for school choice would seem to leave someone with a positive impression, although the devil is in the details.

School Vouchers

Top result: A Google definition that reads, "a government-funded voucher redeemable for tuition fees at a school other than the public school that a student could attend free." (neutral)

Two positive results, seven neutral, four negative. Furthermore, the positive results are only slightly positive, while the negative results are very opposed and make it clear. A Politico article headlined "Vouchers don't do much for students" and a Slate article headlined "Sweden school choice: the country's disastrous experiment ..." are among the negative results.

The positive results are less obvious, under titles like "The impact of school vouchers on college enrollment" and "Public school vouchers: Where are the campaigns?" The term "voucher" is clearly tainted, which is why school choice supporters now try to call them ...

Opportunity Scholarships

Seven positive results, zero neutral, zero negative, three unrelated. Although there are no negative results, someone who Googles for opportunity scholarships might get confused — three of the results are for state-government-run higher education scholarships, not K-12 scholarships/vouchers.

The positive results are mostly official information pages for various opportunity scholarship state programs, which advocate for themselves to varying degrees.

Charter Schools

Top result: What is a charter school? Frequently asked questions (positive)

Four positive results, three neutral, eight negative. Although there are twice as many negative results as positive results, the positive results come up first. The first result is a general definition, given by Uncommon schools, a public charter school network. That's followed by the Wikipedia page for charter schools, then a page from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

But anyone who scrolls past that is likely left with a negative impression. There were three negative news stories the day I searched, followed by three negative op-eds. The rest of the results leaned slightly one way or the other, but the titles don't give away any bias.

Education Savings Accounts

Top result: Understanding Coverdell Esas — Coverdell Education Savings Accounts (unrelated)

Zero positive results, zero neutral, zero negative, 10 unrelated. Although education savings accounts are often hailed as the future of educational choice, they suffer from a major Google problem. All of the results are for tax-advantaged education savings plans, not an education savings account that a government would put funds into for parents to spend on a variety of K-12 educational needs.

This might be okay if the K-12 accounts were easy to explain or the name made it somewhat intuitive, like a school voucher. But their flexibility and relative new-ness make them difficult to understand and the name alone probably brings to mind something closer to the tax-advantaged plans.

Tax Credit Scholarships

Top result: Scholarship Tax Credit — Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (neutral)

Seven positive results, three neutral, zero negative, one unrelated. After Wikipedia, the first result is the homepage for Florida's tax credit scholarship program, and rightly so — it's the nation's largest tax credit scholarship program. Remember: I altered Google to think I live in Kansas. The other positive results came from pro-school choice groups, like the Cato Institute, EdChoice and the American Legislative Exchange Council.

Given my alterations, it's no surprise that EdChoice pages about tax credit scholarship programs in Kansas and Oklahoma showed up.