



## Research & Commentary: Pennsylvania Parents Want More Education Choice Options

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A new survey from EdChoice and the Commonwealth Foundation for Public Policy Alternatives shows the broad popularity of education choice programs in Pennsylvania. The survey of 1,407 registered voters, conducted by Braun Research, Inc., is purposed to “measure public opinion on, and in some cases awareness or knowledge of, a range of K–12 education topics and school choice reforms.”

The survey found a majority of Pennsylvanians, 71 percent, favor the commonwealth’s Educational Improvement Tax Credit Program (EITC), a tax-credit scholarship program launched in 2001 and now enrolling more than 37,000 students. The same percentage approve of the Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit Program (OSTC), another tax-credit scholarship program launched in 2012 and serving more than 14,000 low-income Pennsylvania children.

Both programs received more total support from low-income and black respondents (74 percent and 78 percent, respectively for EITC, 75 percent and 73 percent, respectively, for OSTC) than at large. Residents of Philadelphia were also more supportive of the programs, giving both EITC and OSTC 79 percent support.

Another 69 percent of Pennsylvanians favor raising the budget caps on these programs so they could benefit more children. This included 73 percent of low-income respondents, 77 percent of black respondents, and 80 percent of Philadelphians.

It is not surprising that support for these programs is so high, as copious empirical research on school choice programs finds they offer families improved access to high-quality schools that meet their children’s unique needs and circumstances. Moreover, these programs improve access to schools that deliver quality education affordably. (EITC on its own has saved Pennsylvania taxpayers from \$722 million to \$1.7 billion, or \$3,000 to \$5,800 per student, through Fiscal Year 2014.) Additionally, these programs benefit public school students and taxpayers by increasing competition, decreasing segregation, and improving civic values and practices.

Research also shows students attending private schools are less likely than their public school peers to experience problems such as alcohol abuse, bullying, drug use, fighting, gang activity, racial tension, theft, vandalism, and weapon-based threats. There is also a strong causal

link suggesting private school choice programs improve the mental health of participating students.

Nearly half of respondents, 44 percent, said they would prefer to enroll their children at a private school. Currently, however, only 12 percent of Pennsylvania students are enrolled in a private school.

Pennsylvania parents view education choice programs favorably, and are clamoring for the opportunity to remove their children from the state's public school system and enroll them in private schools. With broad public support for these programs, Pennsylvania legislators should, at the very least, seek to expand the commonwealth's tax-credit scholarship programs in whatever way possible.

The best option, however, would be to pass and enact a universal education savings account (ESA) program, open to every child in Pennsylvania. ESAs pay for tuition and fees at private and parochial schools and could also be used to pay for tutoring services, transportation costs, educational software, online courses, dual-enrollment courses, and educational therapies and services. Additionally, ESAs could be used to cover the fees required to take national standardized achievement tests, such as the SAT and ACT. Leftover funds could be rolled over for use in subsequent school years and would be available to help pay for tuition at postsecondary schools.

Pennsylvania parents also broadly favor ESAs as well, with 73 percent of the general population in favor, 76 percent support from low-income Pennsylvanians, 80 percent from black Pennsylvanians, 82 percent from Philadelphians, and 71 percent of Democrats.

With this kind of support, legislators should give their constituents what they want and enact an ESA program at the next opportunity. The goal of public education in Pennsylvania today and in the years to come should be to allow all parents to choose which schools their children attend, require every school to compete for every student who walks through its doors, and make sure every child has the opportunity to attend a quality school.

The following documents provide more information about education choice programs.

### **Pennsylvania K–12 & School Choice Survey**

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Pennsylvania-K12-School-Choice-Survey.pdf>

The purpose of this Pennsylvania survey conducted by Braun Research, Inc. is to measure public opinion on, and in some cases awareness or knowledge of, a range of K–12 education topics and school choice reforms. It finds significant support across the Quaker State for education choice, the commonwealth's current tax-credit scholarship programs, and education savings accounts (ESA).

### **School Choice Fallacies: Disproving Detractors' Allegations Against Tax-Credit Scholarship Programs**

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/2017-7-Tax-Credit-Brief.pdf>

This report from Martin Lueken and Michael Shaw at EdChoice examine tax codes to address claims alleged by school choice detractors, such as: Tax-credit scholarship programs lead to "profit," "double-dipping," "get-rich schemes," and "tax shelters" for donors.

## **The Tax Credit Scholarship Audit: Do Publicly Funded Private School Choice Programs Save Money?**

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Tax-Credit-Scholarship-Audit-by-Martin-F.-Lueken-UPDATED.pdf>

In this audit, EdChoice Director of Fiscal Policy and Analysis Martin Lueken updates previous work examining the fiscal effects of private school choice programs on state governments, state and local taxpayers, and school districts. Lueken's report analyzes savings from tax credit scholarship programs, which allow individuals and businesses to reduce their state tax liability by making a private donation to a nonprofit organization that provides scholarships for children to attend private schools of their choice. This audit looks at 10 tax credit scholarship programs operating in seven states between 1997 and 2014. These 10 programs serve 93 percent of all students participating in tax credit scholarship programs nationwide.

## **Effects of Scaling Up Private School Choice Programs on Public School Students**

<http://papers.nber.org/tmp/97079-w26758.pdf>

This working paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research finds the continued expansion of Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship Program produced modestly larger benefits for students attending public schools that had a larger initial degree of private school options, measured prior to the introduction of the program. These benefits include higher standardized test scores and lower absenteeism and suspension rates. Effects are particularly pronounced for lower-income students.

## **The Effects of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program on College Enrollment and Graduation: An Update**

<https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99728/the-effects-of-the-florida-tax-credit-scholarship-program-on-college-enrollment-and-graduation-0.pdf>

In this update to a 2017 Urban Institute study, authors Matthew Chingos, Tomas Monarrez, and Daniel Kuehn find students participating in the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program are 99 percent more likely to enroll in a four-year college, and 56 percent more likely to graduate, than their public school peers.

## **The Effects of Statewide Private School Choice on College Enrollment and Graduation: Evidence from the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program**

<https://www.heartland.org/publications-resources/publications/the-effects-of-statewide-private-school-choice-on-college-enrollment-and-graduation-evidence-from-the-florida-tax-credit-scholarship-program>

This study from Urban Institute scholars Matthew Chingos and Daniel Kuehn shows Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship Program boosted college enrollment for participating students by 15 percent, with students enrolled in the program for four or more years seeing a 46 percent hike.

## **Protecting Students with Child Safety Accounts**

<https://www.heartland.org/publications-resources/publications/protecting-students-with-child-safety-accounts>

In this *Heartland Policy Brief*, Vicki Alger, senior fellow at the Independent Women's Forum and research fellow at the Independent Institute and Heartland Policy Analyst Tim Benson detail the prevalence of bullying, harassment, and assault taking place in America's public schools and the difficulties for parents in moving their child from an unsafe school. Alger and Benson propose a Child Safety Account program, which would allow parents to immediately move their

child to a safe school— private, parochial, or public— as soon as parents feel the school their child is currently attending is too dangerous for their child’s physical or emotional health.

### **The 123s of School Choice**

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/123s-of-School-Choice.pdf>

This report from EdChoice is an in-depth review of the available research on private school choice programs in America. Areas of study include: private school choice program participant test scores, program participant attainment, parent satisfaction, public school students’ test scores, civic values and practices, racial/ethnic integration and fiscal effects.

### **A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Choice (Fourth Edition)**

<http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/A-Win-Win-Solution-The-Empirical-Evidence-on-School-Choice.pdf>

This paper by EdChoice details how a vast body of research shows educational choice programs improve academic outcomes for students and schools, saves taxpayers money, reduces segregation in schools, and improves students’ civic values. This edition brings together a total of 100 empirical studies examining these essential questions in one comprehensive report.

### **The Public Benefit of Private Schooling: Test Scores Rise When There Is More of It**

<https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa830.pdf>

This *Policy Analysis* from the Cato Institute examines the effect increased access to private schooling has had on international student test scores in 52 countries. The Cato researchers found that a 1 percentage point increase in the share of private school enrollment would lead to moderate increases in students’ math, reading, and science achievement.

### **The Effects of School Choice on Mental Health**

[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3272550](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3272550)

This study from Corey DeAngelis at the Cato Institute and Angela K. Dills of Western Carolina University empirically examines the relationship between school choice and mental health. It finds that states adopting broad-based voucher programs and charter schools witness declines in adolescent suicides and suggests that private schooling reduces the number of times individuals are seen for mental health issues.

### **Competition: For the Children**

<https://www.heartland.org/publications-resources/publications/competition-for-the-children>

This study from the Texas Public Policy Foundation claims universal school choice results in higher test scores for students remaining in traditional public schools and improved high school graduation rates.

Nothing in this *Research & Commentary* is intended to influence the passage of legislation, and it does not necessarily represent the views of The Heartland Institute. For further information on this subject, visit [\*School Reform News\*](#), The Heartland Institute’s [website](#), and [PolicyBot](#), Heartland’s free online research database.

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