



Research & Commentary: Mediocrity of Oklahoma’s ‘Best’ Public School District Highlights Need For ESA Program in the Sooner State

Tim Benson

June 16, 2021

An article by the website Stacker recently named Jenks Public Schools, just south of Tulsa, as the best public school district in Oklahoma, at the same time noting that only 44 percent of the 12,165 students in the district were proficient to grade level in reading and just 42 percent were proficient to grade level in math.

With the “best district” in the state barely able to get just four out of 10 students to proficiency at grade level, it is not surprising that the Sooner State’s education rankings are abysmal.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), administered every two years and colloquially known as the “Nation’s Report Card,” only 34 percent of Oklahoma fourth graders and 25 percent of eighth graders tested proficient in mathematics in 2019, while just 28 percent of fourth graders and 25 percent of eighth graders tested proficient in reading.

Clearly, the status quo in Oklahoma’s public school system is not working. Something needs to be done to give Oklahoma parents better education options. Legislators should therefore use the upcoming legislative session to provide families with an education savings account (ESA) program, which would ensure their constituents have the opportunity to place their children in a school that most suits their needs.

With an ESA, state education funds allocated for a child are placed in a parent-controlled savings account. Parents then use a state-provided, restricted-use debit card to access the funds to pay for the resources chosen for their child’s unique educational program, which can include tuition at a private or parochial school, online learning programs, private tutoring, educational therapies, textbooks, etc.

Copious empirical research on school choice programs such as ESAs find these programs offer families improved access to high-quality schools that meet their children’s unique needs and circumstances. What’s more, these programs improve academic performance and attainment and

deliver a quality education at lower cost than traditional public schools. Additionally, these programs benefit public school students and taxpayers by increasing competition, decreasing segregation, and improving civic values and practices.

Research also shows students at 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 school choice programs improve the mental health of participating students.

It is probably for these reasons, and also because teacher unions have repeatedly played politics with school closings during the COVID-19 pandemic in direct conflict with students' best interests, that ESAs are more popular with parents than ever before. Polling by EdChoice released in December 2020 found 81 percent support for ESAs, for example, among the general public and 86 percent among current school parents, the highest level of support the program has received in the organization's eight years of polling on the issue. This represents a 4-percentage point increase over 2019. These findings are mirrored in the American Federation for Children's seventh-annual National School Choice Poll, released in January 2021, which saw 78 percent support for ESA programs.

An expansive ESA program would be the perfect complement to the state's Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarships for Students with Disabilities voucher program and the Oklahoma Equal Opportunity Education Scholarships tax-credit scholarship program for low-income students. The goal of public education in Oklahoma 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.

There has not been a time when providing these opportunities has been more urgent and more needed than right now. Legislators should recognize that and allow families as many options as possible to get their children the education they need and deserve.

The following documents provide more information about education savings accounts and education choice.

The 123s of School Choice (2021 Edition)

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2021-123s-SlideShare-1.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.

The Fiscal Effects of Private K–12 Education Choice Programs in the United States

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Fiscal-Effects-of-Private-K-12-Education-Choice-Program-in-the-United-States-1.pdf>

From an analysis of 40 private educational choice programs in 19 states plus D.C., this EdChoice working paper summarizes the facts and evidence on the fiscal effects of educational choice programs across the United States. The programs in the analysis include three education savings accounts programs (ESAs), 19 school voucher programs, and 18 tax-credit scholarship programs.

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.

Child Safety Accounts: Protecting Our Children through Parental Freedom

<https://www.heartland.org/template-assets/documents/publications/CSAccountsPB.pdf>

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 having their child moved from a school that is unsafe for them. Alger and Benson propose a Child Safety Account program, which would allow parents to immediately have their child moved to a safe school – private, parochial, or public – as soon as parents feel the public school their child is currently attending is too dangerous to their child's physical or emotional health.

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

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.