



## Study Finds School Choice Improves Students' Happiness

Christopher Jacobs

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At a time countless students face obstacles that could permanently stunt their learning growth, school choice provides one obvious solution to help mitigate a 'lost generation.'

As millions of children across the country continue to suffer from school closures and disruptions related to the coronavirus pandemic, a new study shows one simple way to improve students' mental health: Expand school choice.

(Disclosure: I have worked on several client projects that promote school choice. However, those clients have no knowledge of, or any input into, this article, and the views expressed in it are—as always—my own.)

While the data used in the study precede the pandemic, its conclusions should help shape post-COVID education. At a time countless students face academic and emotional obstacles that could permanently stunt their learning growth, school choice provides one obvious solution to help mitigate a "lost generation" of American youth.

### Impact on Suicide Rates

The study, released in December and conducted by a Cato Institute scholar and Western Carolina University economist, used two different methods to examine the impact of school choice on mental health. First, the researchers used examined variations in teenage (i.e., 15-19) suicide rates based on states' different charter school laws. Charter schools—which receive taxpayer funding but whose charters free them from many of the bureaucratic obstacles of traditional public schools—represent a common form of school choice, with 3.3 million students enrolled at 7,500 schools in 44 different states.

The analysis yielded "robust" results: "We consistently find declines in suicides following the adoption of charter schools," equivalent to a 10 percent decrease in the suicide rate for 15-19 year olds. The researchers found some reduction in suicides among students attending private schools after receiving opportunity scholarships (also known as vouchers). However, the results in the scholarship group did not rise to the level of statistical significance—possibly because scholarship programs are less developed than charter programs, with more recent origins and fewer student participants.

The researchers also examined how school attendance impacts the self-reported mental health of former students in adulthood, using a decades-long study of students aged 12-18 in 1997. Students who attended private school in 1997 were between 1.9-2.9 percentage points less likely to have a mental health condition in their late 20s and early 30s, based on a survey conducted in 2013.

### **Why School Choice Improves Mental Health**

In putting the first-of-its-kind study in context, the researchers offered some possible explanations for why school choice can improve mental health. For starters, private schools and charter academies often put more emphasis on character, thereby discouraging bullying behaviors. The authors also noted that, for students bullied in traditional public schools due to their love of a specific subject—say, performing arts or science—moving to a private school focused on that subject would place them among like-minded students, alleviating a source of stress.

The authors also note the most obvious explanation for why school choice could improve student mental health: Parents and families get to pick the school that works best for their children—placing them in the best environment to succeed. Private schools in particular also face competitive pressures, because parents who do not feel their child is receiving an education worth their tuition dollars will enroll their children elsewhere.

All told, these beneficial effects on student mental health more than offset any added stress from a more intense academic environment, or the beneficial effects of higher spending by public schools (most of which has gone towards administrative staff rather than teaching). As the analysts conclude: “School choice improves mental health....As public attention focuses on the mental health of adolescents in the United States, the results imply that increased school choice advances the public goal of improving mental health outcomes.”

### **Put Children First**

The results of this study provide yet another data point for policymakers to bolster the case for expanding school choice. On the state level, lawmakers should work to expand opportunity scholarship programs in their 2021 legislative sessions. In Washington DC, Joe Biden should rethink his newfound hostility towards charter schools, and instead come up with a platform that puts students’ needs—and not those of government bureaucrats or teachers’ unions—first.

Events over the past 12 months have put into stark relief the stakes of the education debate in this country. America’s youth need a better future than the current COVID-defined present—and the failed *status quo* of the past. School choice can help them, and us, get there.

*Chris Jacobs is founder and CEO of Juniper Research Group, and author of the book, "The Case Against Single Payer." He is on Twitter: @chrisjacobsHC.*