EducationWeek® | SPOTLIGHT®

2025

The Landscape of Charter Schools

Courtesy of McLendon Photography

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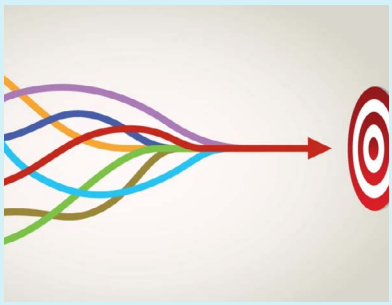
EDITOR'S NOTE

This Spotlight explores the dynamic and evolving world of school choice, focusing on charter schools and private school choice programs. Delve into proposed federal initiatives, how charters are improving experiences for students with disabilities, and a leading advocate's reflections on the movement's evolution. Examine research on public funds for private education, why teachers might embrace private school choice, and more.



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OPINION

Published May 22, 2025

What to Know About the Private School Choice Program Moving Through Congress

By Mark Lieberman

George Walker IV/AP

Penelope Koutoulas holds signs supporting school choice in a House committee meeting on education during a special session of the state legislature in Nashville, Tenn. While a number of states, including Tennessee, have passed new programs funding private school tuition in recent years, the first major federal foray into private school choice is now making its way through Congress.

Congress has taken a major and unprecedented step toward creating a federal private school choice program

Congress on Wednesday took a major and unprecedented step toward creating a federal private school choice program, as House lawmakers narrowly approved a sweeping legislative package with $5 billion in annual tax credits that fuel scholarships and related expenses at K-12 private schools.

The federal subsidies would come in the form of dollar-for-dollar tax credits for individuals and corporations that donate to largely unregulated state-level organizations that give out scholarship funds for parents to spend on private educational options of their choosing.

Any student—even in states that have resisted expanding private school choice—from a family earning less than 300 percent of the area median gross income would be eligible to benefit from a scholarship paid for with a federally refunded donation.

Those scholarship funds could go toward private school tuition; curriculum materials; textbooks; tutoring services; fees for exams or dual-enrollment programs with colleges and universities; home-school expenses; and speech and occupational therapy services for students with disabilities.

The law says families can claim the credits equally for expenses related to private and public school students alike. It's not clear which organizations, either existing or hypothetical, would be serving public school students and accepting donations eligible for tax-credit reimbursement.

The particulars of the private school choice piece and the broader legislation surrounding it are complex and could change. The Senate still has to deliberate and vote on the package before it gets to President Donald Trump's desk. Democrats uniformly oppose the education provisions of the legislation, which have also drawn some criticism from some of the most fervent backers of private school choice policies that have proliferated in states over the last decade.

Even so, if the proposal moves forward, at least one core takeaway is simple, said Josh Cowen, a professor of education policy at Michigan State University and a leading critic of the private school choice movement: "Vouchers are coming to your state. If you are in favor of them, that's a good thing. If you're not in favor of them, it's a bad thing."

Here's what else we know about the federal tax-credit scholarship proposal as it currently stands—and what it could mean if it's signed into law in its current form.

No other federal tax credit is as generous

The Internal Revenue Service doesn't currently supply tax credits worth the full donation amount for any cause, as the private school choice scholarship credit would do.

The federal government currently offers tax credits on donations for disaster relief, houses of worship, veterans' assistance groups, and children's hospitals at roughly 37 percent of the donated amount. A $10,000 donation to those causes would yield a tax credit of $3,700.

By contrast, under the proposed legislation, if a taxpayer donates $10,000 to a scholarship-granting organization, the IRS would give them a tax credit of $10,000.

An individual's tax credit would be capped at 10 percent of the person's adjusted gross income for that year, or at $5,000 if their adjusted gross income is less than $50,000. That means some of the nation's wealthiest residents could claim huge swaths of the $5 billion annual allocation all on their own.

If the tax credit were in effect in 2021, for instance, Elon Musk could have received tax-credit reimbursement worth $2.9 billion, or roughly 60 percent of the annual nationwide offering, according to an analysis by the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, a left-leaning think tank.

Some taxpayers could even profit from the legislation as written, according to another ITEP analysis. Donors could contribute marketable securities like corporate stock, claim a tax credit worth the full value of that stock, and then avoid paying the capital gains tax they would have to pay if they had held onto the stock instead.

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>
> **CHRIS LUBIENSKI**
> Professor of education policy
> Indiana University

The major new investment would be on par with many federal programs for K-12 education

For fiscal year 2024, Congress allocated slightly more than $18 billion for Title I funding to support low-income students in public schools; $13 billion for special education; and $12 billion for Head Start providers of early childhood education.

The annual private school choice investment would fall short of those flagship education programs. But it would dramatically outpace federal funding for other K-12 priorities.

The annual private school choice investment would amount to more than five times the annual allocation for Title III funds to support the nation's 5 million K-12 English learners; more than 10 times the annual funding for federal charter school grants; and 39 times the annual investment in McKinney-Vento grants to support the nation's 1.4 million homeless public school students.

A $5 billion investment in private school choice would be roughly equivalent to the federal investment in the public K-12 schools of Illinois in the 2022-23 school year, the most recent one for which federal data are available. Only four states—California, Florida, New York, and Texas—got more than $5 billion apiece from the federal government for K-12 public schools that year.

The legislation as written leaves room for the program's funding to grow. If at least 90 percent of the available credits are claimed in a given year, funding for the following year would be equivalent to 105 percent of that year's total allocated amount.

After 2029, the limit on the amount of tax credits awarded each year would disappear entirely, without further Congressional action.

It's not clear how states would react to the new program

In the last half-decade, a slew of Republican-led states have ramped up their investment in various forms of private school vouchers, including education savings accounts, direct tax credits, and tax-credit scholarships like the one Congress is currently considering.

Thirty states and the District of Columbia have at least one private school choice program, according to Education Week's private school choice tracker. Of those, 17 states have at least one private school choice program for which every K-12 student in the state is eligible or will be in the coming years.

When Republicans won control of the presidency and Congress in November, some observers assumed states without private school choice already would struggle to make the case for it as federal action loomed. That didn't pan out—Idaho, Tennessee, Texas, and Wyoming all approved major new investments in private school choice this year.

Even so, private school choice hasn't been universally embraced, even in places where conservatives dominate politics. Lawmakers in Kansas, Mississippi, and South Dakota ultimately rejected private school choice investments they were considering this year. North Dakota's governor even vetoed a proposal approved by both houses of the legislature, saying it didn't do enough to enhance choice in the public school sector.

The emergence of a new federal offering could fuel efforts to rein in some state spending on private school choice, Cowen said. That's especially true in light of Congress' current push to cut federal Medicaid spending states rely on to cover one of the biggest line items in their operating budgets.

"The longstanding tendency for states to over time increasingly rely on federal investments to shore up what they want to do politically and then spend their own dollars on other stuff—there's no reason to believe vouchers wouldn't follow that exact same pattern," Cowen said.

States like Arizona, Florida, and Ohio have already seen private school choice costs outpace projections and approach or exceed $1 billion a year. Vouchers, ESAs, or tax credits for the large share of participating students who were already attending private schools before taking advantage of state subsidies for private education represent new expenses for states.

Federal offerings would help meet surging demand for funds from existing state programs

Critics of private school choice have long argued that these programs amount to giveaways for wealthy families who can already afford private school, which often costs substantially more than the subsidies states award to families. In some states, researchers have found that new private school choice offerings lead private schools to bump up their tuition costs.

The federal offering would help some families taking advantage of state funds for private education by giving them thousands more dollars to close the gap between the costs and the government subsidies. It would also add an option for families in states like Pennsylvania and Tennessee whose applications to participate in existing state programs were rejected.

Most students currently benefiting from private school choice were already attending private school before getting state dollars to cover costs. It remains to be seen how much demand there would be for public school students to take advantage of federal voucher support in states that don't currently have any such offerings. But it's likely that current private school families would find the prospect of federal relief appealing.

"You'll see campaigns that encourage kids to leave public schools and use this to attend private schools," said Chris Lubienski, a professor of education policy at Indiana University.

Cowen predicts the 20 states that already have tax-credit scholarship programs of their own would see faster uptake for the federal tax credits than states that may not have scholarship-granting organizations already in operation and ready to give out funds.

Under the currently proposed legislation, no more than $500 million of the $5 billion in tax credits could go to residents of a single state. Taxpayers who receive a state tax credit for the same donation would have to deduct that amount from their federal tax credit.

The current approach circumvents opposition on several fronts

Because the private school choice proposal is part of a tax cut package rather than a budget

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> Professor of education policy
> Indiana University

bill, it needs only 51 votes to pass in the Senate—a much easier lift than convincing at least seven Democrats to join the chamber's 53 Republicans in advancing a traditional bill.

The federal legislation also helps advocates for private school choice get around a persistent obstacle: public resistance to taxpayer investments in private schools, particularly in rural areas where public schools are widely embraced and often the only option.

Last November, voters in three states decisively rejected ballot initiatives that aimed to endorse or allow private school choice. Two of those states, Kentucky and Nebraska, are dominated by Republican voters who overwhelmingly supported Trump. In Kentucky, a majority of voters in each of its 130 counties opposed the private school choice item.

"The rhetoric for the last couple decades has been focused on inner-city minority populations that would benefit," Lubienski said. To gather political support in rural areas, "school choice advocacy is going to have to overcome that barrier," he said.

Private school choice proponents don't love everything about the proposal

Billions of federal dollars going toward private school would be the biggest victory yet for the private school choice movement, which is funded in large part by far-right donors and some of the world's wealthiest people. But the current bill hasn't drawn universal praise from advocates for private school choice.

The House bill that passed Wednesday includes an explicit ban on participating schools discriminating against students with disabilities when deciding whom to admit.

Robert Enlow, executive director of leading school choice advocacy group EdChoice, told Chalkbeat he worries that requirement will deter participation from some private schools that value their autonomy to select students as they see fit.

A coalition of dozens of religious liberty groups, meanwhile, wrote to Congress this month urging lawmakers not to endorse private school choice. "The responsibility for religious education belongs to families, houses of worship, and other religious institutions—we do not need or want the government to be involved," the groups wrote. Religious schools account for about two-thirds of the nation's private schools, and there's no prohibition in the package making its way through Congress on religious schools accepting these federally supported scholarships.

The proposal also runs counter to the conventional wisdom that conservative politicians favor "local control" and abhor federal intervention in state issues, Lubienski said. Trump and Education Secretary Linda McMahon have repeatedly emphasized "returning education to the states," but a major new federal education initiative does the opposite, he said.

"This is the federal government coming in and imposing a will on both states and localities where they might otherwise reject this," he said. ■

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Published July 16, 2024

Here's How Charters Can Improve Experiences for Students With Disabilities

By Evie Blad

Liz Yap for Education Week + Getty

Charter schools, which have long enrolled fewer children with disabilities than traditional public schools, must prioritize improving access and experiences for the growing student population—and states, authorizers, and community organizations must support them in that work.

That's the conclusion of a new report that argues that improving approaches to special education and enrollment is vital for both the well-being of students and the long-term success of the charter sector.

States and authorizers can play a role by shaping policies like application processes, giving students with disabilities priority in enrollment lotteries, and monitoring schools' success, said the report released July 16 by the Center for Learner Equity, a research and advocacy organization that focuses on how the charter sector serves students with disabilities.

"Parents of kids with disabilities are not interested in the argument of districts vs. charters; they just want good schools," CLE Executive Director Lauren Morando Rhim said. "In our ideal world, their child could go to both schools, they are both good options, and [parents] know how to navigate those choices."

The Charter School Equity, Growth, Quality, and Sustainability Study, commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is the result of two years of expert interviews, legislative reviews, and data analysis to determine how charters can better fulfill their obligations to students with disabilities. It includes recommendations for nonprofit organizations, states, and charter authorizers. A report with specific recommendations for schools will be published in the fall. (The Gates Foundation provides funding to Education Week. The media organization retains full editorial control over its articles.)

While charter schools' overall enrollment has grown steadily over the last decade, enrollment of students with disabilities has not kept pace, the report said. Students with disabilities made up 14.1 percent of traditional public school enrollment in the 2021-22 school year, but only 11.5 percent of charter school enrollment.

"Critics of charter schools, ascendant in some state legislatures, have and will continue to use negative examples to threaten the sector's health and sustainability," the report said.

Charters, many of which operate independently outside of larger organizations, face challenges of scale with teachers, support staff, and resources that can create hurdles for effective special education plans. But the publicly funded schools were also created to have greater flexibility, allowing for innovation in critical areas like equity for students with all learning needs, Morando Rhim said.

For example, both charters and traditional public schools have struggled to retain special education teachers. Charter schools, smaller and more nimble than large districts, could try teacher-driven experimental models for staffing, planning, and case management to improve the educator experience over the long term, Morando Rhim said.

"We were surprised we didn't see more of that," she said. "If teachers go into schools and they feel like they can't be successful, they are not going to stay in the profession."

Among the report's recommendations:

- States should update charter-authorizing laws to prioritize enrollment access for students with disabilities, and they should allow schools to grant those students preference in enrollment lotteries.
- States should update their Medicaid reimbursement policies to ensure charter schools can more easily claim reimbursement for student services.
- State agencies should increase accountability measures and create school report cards that provide information about the experiences of students with disabilities in charters.
- Authorizers should identify students with disabilities as a priority in the new school approval process, calling upon organizers to better consider their needs in the earliest days of their planning.
- Authorizers should create guidance on charters' legal obligations to students with disabilities and promote promising practices to "show what excellence looks like."
- Nonprofit organizations should help charter schools build capacity by connecting them to community resources that can help serve students.
- Nonprofit organizations that work with charters should target grant funding for special education services and supports. ■

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Published December 20, 2023

How the Charter School Movement Is Changing: A Top Charter Advocate Looks Back and Ahead

By Arianna Prothero

The president and CEO of the nation's largest charter school advocacy organization is stepping down at the end of 2023.

Nina Rees has led the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools for the past 11 years, a time that has seen major changes in the charter school sector, which has arisen as the most prominent alternative to the traditional public school system.

Charter schools are publicly funded but privately run schools of choice overseen by nonprofit boards versus elected ones.

Charter school enrollment more than doubled from the fall of 2010 to 2021, according to federal data, and the sector now educates 3.7 million students—which is 7.4 percent of all public school students. And it continues to expand. This year, Montana became the 46th state to pass a law allowing charter schools to operate.

Rees has spent decades helping shape education policy. Prior to her tenure at NAPCS, she served as the first Deputy Under Secretary for Innovation and Improvement at the U.S. Department of Education under George W. Bush and worked on the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act and the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship, a federally funded voucher program.

Education Week spoke with Rees about how the charter school sector has changed during her tenure, and what is ahead for the movement—both in terms of challenges and opportunities. (*Rees has not announced what she will do next, nor has the alliance named a new CEO.*)

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

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Courtesy of McLendon Photography

Nina Rees, president and CEO of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, emphasizes that she has "always thought of [charter schools] as laboratories of innovation with the hopes of replicating those innovations in district-run schools."

> **"You'll see campaigns that encourage kids to leave public schools and use this to attend private schools."**
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In your opinion, what have been the most significant developments in the charter sector during your tenure?

irst, the growth in the number of students in charter schools. We saw an even greater growth during the pandemic.

The other significant development, of course, is the shifts in the politics of charter schools, which started, quite frankly, when I began this job, when President Obama was in office. When he first came in, there was a lot of momentum. He was a big supporter, wanted double the allocation for the [federal] Charter Schools Program [the only source of federal funding for opening new charter schools and expanding or replicating existing ones].

We also saw an increase in the number of schools in certain communities, certainly New Orleans was one of them, Washington, D.C., and a few other places. So, the establishment [such as teachers' unions] started to pay more attention and more aggressively attack charter schools. I would say during the pandemic, some of that noise has dissipated because everyone's obviously more concerned with reopening schools and ensuring students are safe, and everyone's collectively dealing with the mounting achievement gap that COVID caused.

When I started this job, the focus [in charter schools was] on getting students to and through college at elite schools. As time has gone on, there's been more attention to making sure students are attending a school

that fits their needs, a greater attention to potentially sending students to schools that prepare them for a job, and more CTE charter schools.

If you had one wish to change one thing in the past 11 years, what would it be?

Well, look, 65 percent of our sector is led by leaders who are just running one school or just a handful of schools. When you talk about charter schools, certainly the opposition seems to [criticize] charter management organizations that are running multiple sites and that are not part of the community. From a messaging standpoint, I wish that our sector had elevated [independent charter school leaders'] voices. The face of the sector truly is these 65 percent of leaders who are just running one school that is customized to fit the needs of the community.

Most of our [school] leaders are there just to educate their students, and that is as it should be. But we also live in a highly political system that's become even more politicized. So, in that respect, we're trying now hard to make sure people understand that in order for them to save their schools and to open more charter schools and to allow more families to come to their schools, that they have to be more politically engaged.

What is the most difficult problem facing charter schools today?

Well, one of them is teacher fatigue. And then right now, just closing the achievement gap that was accentuated during the pandemic is front and center for a lot of educators.

Keeping the pipeline of talent to open new schools used to be fueled by groups like Teach for America. That entity is not graduating as many students. And there's just not as many TFA teachers who are interested in opening charter schools. There are individuals now who are running community centers, after-school programs, and other organizations that are adjacent to education who could potentially run really effective schools, but they are different from the pipeline that we've had in the past. You have to always be attracting new individuals, challenging them to open great schools, and also shielding charter schools from rules and regulations that dampen innovation or the types of innovators who could potentially create great schools.

I think it's really important to pay attention to that and bring a new generation of individuals who are dedicated to opening schools and running highly transformational institutions.

What do you see as the biggest challenges and opportunities for charter schools in the next decade?

This talent issue, making sure that we are attracting newcomers, making this field interesting and attractive for them to enter. And one of the things we just did at the federal level is amend the Charter Schools Program to allow for pre-planning grants so that individuals who want to apply for a charter have some resources to apply to their authorizer [the entities that have the legal authority to grant charters, to open a school].

The second thing [is] the evolution of AI, which is happening right before our eyes and how you use it both to make teaching and learning easier in the classroom, helping students through AI tutors and whatnot, but also being at the forefront of really educating the types of minds you need to build for the future workforce. A lot of them are going to enter a workplace with jobs that don't currently exist.

And then the evolving politics, to the extent the left and the right are pulling in different directions, you don't want charters to continue to get pulled in one way or the other.

How do you see charter schools' role in the broader K-12 education system in the future?

Personally, I've always thought of them as laboratories of innovation with the hopes of replicating those innovations in district-run schools. And a lot of those innovations right now are around management, expanding the school day, expanding the school year, differentiated pay. There are some models around restorative justice and trauma-informed models that some of our schools are experimenting with that they're sharing with other public schools.

For these types of innovations to take hold, you do need to invest a lot more in research and development, either at the federal level, state level, or through [philanthropy]. Because it's hard for a district superintendent to look at one school and decide, OK, it's working really well in this one school, I'm going take it to every single school in my community. You need to test and test in order to gain confidence that it can be scaled [to an entire school district]. That, to me, is really important. ■

More Like This

The School Choice Landscape Is Shifting

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Published October 10, 2024

Private School Choice: What the Research Says

Policies letting families use public funds for private education are proliferating

By Mark Lieberman

Programs that offer families public funds to spend on private education expenses are becoming bigger, more common, and more complex.

Debates about these programs are dominated by claims from supporters and opponents, many of which leave little room for nuance. Academic research can help separate hype from reality—but figuring out what the research actually says can be a challenge even for the researchers themselves, not to mention advocates, critics, policymakers, and journalists who cite studies in their work.

More than half of states now have at least one private school choice program, according to Education Week's private school choice tracker. Many have several. Twelve have programs that currently or eventually will accept applications from all students in the state.

This school year, for the first time ever, more than 1 million of the nation's 50 million K-12 children took advantage of private school choice, according to the nonprofit EdChoice, a leading advocate.

A closer look at the private school choice literature reveals some consistent findings as well as a number of gaps in understanding. That's in part because measuring the effects of private school choice on outcomes like student-test scores is no easy task.

Many states either don't require students accepting funds from these programs to participate in state exams that public school students take, or they don't report test-score data from private schools. Researchers often depend on state education departments to supply data suitable for rigorous analysis, but not all states are eager to help. And many private school curricula differ from public schools, making apples-to-apples comparisons of test scores less meaningful.

Meanwhile, assessing the research consensus can be challenging due to the proliferation of studies from advocates of private school choice, which tend to offer a rosier view of these programs than truly independent analysts do.

With those caveats in mind, here's a look at what we know—and don't yet know—about private school choice.

What we know about the academic achievement of students using private school choice

Summary:

Studies that examine the early days of private school choice programs, from the 2000s, show that participating students—largely low-income students from urban areas—modestly outperformed their public school peers on standardized tests. More recent peer-reviewed studies, looking at programs that are newer and larger, have shown the opposite.

Evidence:

In 2002, for instance, researchers found that Black students in New York City, the District of Columbia, and Dayton, Ohio, all saw bigger improvements in test scores upon accepting private school vouchers than did their peers who stayed in public school.

But more recent examinations of private school choice programs have identified notable achievement gaps.

In Louisiana, researchers in 2018 attributed slightly lower math scores among participants in private school choice to "low-quality private schools" that the state approved to participate in the voucher program. One study found that "substantial" negative impacts on math test scores of private school choice participants got smaller after one year but were still present after four years.

In the District of Columbia, researchers for the federal government analyzed data from the first year of the program and found a "statistically significant negative impact on the mathematics achievement" of participating students.

And in Indiana, researchers found that private school students' math test scores dropped slightly during their first year using a private school voucher, compared with students in a public school. That gap "persisted regardless of the length of time spent in a private school." English scores didn't take a similar hit, researchers found.

How competition from private school choice affects public schools

Summary:

A handful of studies have largely reached the same conclusion: Students who enroll in private school choice programs aren't substantially more or less likely to attend college than their peers in public schools. That said, several studies suggest a more competitive education

marketplace improves public school students' academic performance.

Evidence:

In Louisiana, where researchers found big differences in test scores between private school choice participants and public schools, little difference appeared in educational attainment between those two groups. The same was true in the District of Columbia, multiple studies show.

But researchers have found on several occasions that private school choice programs might be doing more to help students from public schools than their harshest critics realize.

The introduction of Florida's private school choice program led to higher test scores and lower rates of absenteeism among public school students, particularly but not exclusively for low-income students, according to a study published last November. Researchers in Louisiana came to a similar conclusion a few years earlier.

Published studies so far have focused largely on the existence of these competitive effects without speculating much as to why competition sparks these improvements.

When it comes to comparing public schools and private schools, at least one set of researchers argues any differences can be attributed not to the schools but entirely to the different socioeconomic characteristics of students in the two sectors.

Who participates in private school choice programs?

Summary:

So far, it appears the primary beneficiaries of universal private school choice programs in particular are wealthier families, who were typically excluded when eligibility for vouchers and education savings accounts was geared toward lower-income students and students with disabilities. Most private school choice recipients in the newer programs were already in private school prior to accepting state funds, according to state data and researchers.

Evidence:

In Ohio, one study of a state program that awarded vouchers to students from low-performing schools found that most recipients were low-income children or students of color. But some of the most economically disadvantaged people in the state were less likely than wealthier families to take advantage of the voucher opportunity even when they were eligible.

In Arizona, which has had a universal ESA offering for the last two school years, families in the wealthiest 10 percent of the state's population participated in the program at five times the rate of families in the poorest 10 percent of the state's population, according to researchers at Brookings, a left-leaning think tank.

A similar pattern holds true when looking at educational attainment. In the geographic areas of the state with the largest share of college graduates, participation in the ESA program was five times more common than in the areas with the smallest share of college graduates.

What private schools do when students qualify for public funds

Summary:

Early evidence from universal programs suggests that private schools tend to raise tuition when states expand eligibility for vouchers and ESAs to all students. Some advocates claim that private schools poach the most gifted students from public schools, but researchers studying that phenomenon have yet to find substantial evidence.

Evidence:

When Indiana expanded its existing voucher program so that all the state's students were eligible to apply, private schools responded by increasing prices by as much as 25 percent, according to a working paper published earlier this year from researchers at Princeton University.

"If a goal of ESAs is to extend private school access to new families, the substantial tuition increases they produce may limit access," wrote authors Jason Fontana and Jennifer L. Jennings.

That research builds on findings from 2016 that show that private schools generate more revenue when states offer more money to families to send their kids to those schools.

On the other hand, researchers could find no evidence in 2023 that private schools were "skimming the cream" out of public schools by enrolling their most gifted students, thereby prompting a drop in public schools' average test scores.

Those same researchers, however, did find evidence that private schools tend to push out the lowest-performing students receiving private school choice subsidies. A decade-old study found that students who return to public schools from private school choice programs tend to subsequently get higher test scores but end up in schools with lower-than-average performance, researchers found.

What we still don't know about private school choice

Much of the private school choice research so far has examined voucher programs, which give parents money to spend on private school tuition. And in general, much of the research has primarily used data from the earlier, narrowly targeted set of private school choice programs, rather than the more expansive programs that have swept conservative state legislatures in the last three years.

Fewer studies have examined the newer iteration of private school choice known as "education savings accounts," which can be spent on a wider range of private education expenses, including for textbooks, transportation, and materials for home schooling.

Other topics that appear ripe for more analysis include the ripple effects of private school choice on phenomena like racial and economic school segregation; state funding for public schools; and enrollment trends in public schools. ■

Education Week

Published December 19, 2024

How a Microschool Is Trying to Become A Model for Public Schools

This microschool utilizes community partnerships to get kids learning beyond the classroom

By Sam Mallon

La Luz was founded in 2020 by Kyle Gamba, a former public school educator, who saw high levels of disengagement from students, despite teachers' best efforts, and believed there was a better way. La Luz is tuition-free, supported by grants, and serves the same population of students, while spending the same amount per student, as their local public schools. But instead of spending all day in a classroom, students are learning in the community.

The 40 students in the school spend each morning receiving two hours of traditional academic instruction in classrooms rented from Denver Public Schools before spending the rest of the day in experiential learning.

On Mondays, this tends to mean learning in nature at a nearby park, under the instruction of La Luz teachers, who are referred to as guides. The rest of the week is spent learning on site with a community partner, an experience that rotates every three to six weeks. Past rotations have included History Colorado, Denver Parks and Recreation, and CSU Spur, as well as the Denver Zoo. At each site, students are learning under the direction of La Luz guides, with support from the on-site organization.

Here's a look at what one educator believes public school could be. ■

Published June 7, 2024

How Microschools Can Fit in the Broader K-12 System

By Sam Mallon

Microschools aren't a replacement for public schools. Rather, they are one more way to meet the learning needs of an increasingly wide range of students, explains Coi Morefield, the founder of The Lab School of Memphis, a microschool in Tennessee.

Microschools, which have gained popularity in recent years as parents and educators advocate for school choice and individualized learning models, typically support fewer than 150 students and can be supported with public or private funding. The Lab School of Memphis has 45 students in grades K-8 and emphasizes hands-on learning and one-on-one and small group instruction. Its budget is supported with tuition and grants.

To better understand how microschools operate and the challenges they face, watch and listen as Morefield explains how she sees the educational format working within the broader K-12 landscape. ■

Education Week

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OPINION

Published January 28, 2025

Teachers Might Embrace Private School Choice. Here's Why it Hinges on the Benefits Visible to Educators

By Rick Hess

There's a familiar, frustrating tension between practice and policy. When it comes to grading, devices, equity, choice, student behavior, and much else, there are yawning gaps between the views from inside and outside the schoolhouse. Worse, educators and policy types often wind up talking past one another. I think we can do better. To delve into this disconnect, I reached out to Alex Baron, the director of academic strategy at a District of Columbia charter school, an Oxford Ph.D., and a former early-childhood and high school math teacher. Together, we'll try to bridge a bit of the practice-policy chasm.
—Rick

Rick: Let's talk school choice. You've always been a strong supporter of public school choice. But today, I want to talk about the edgier cases: school vouchers and education savings accounts (ESAs). Should educators embrace these kinds of private school choice programs?

Our friends at the NEA and the AFT think the answer is an emphatic "NO!" But Congress is considering a big federal scholarship tax credit, states keep adding programs, and these programs are an increasingly prominent part of the K-12 landscape.

I think this is a good thing for parents. Perhaps more surprising, I also think that expanding private school choice is a potentially terrific thing for educators.

Why?

Let's start with this: The norm today is that teachers work for their local school district—whatever its policies, practices, expectations, and indignities. Talk about a 1920s notion of a company town! That's a problem. Don't like the district's instructional culture or disciplinary practices? You've got limited options. You can commute to another district, escape to one of the handful of nondistrict alternatives, or hope administrators don't hassle you when your door is closed.

This works differently in other professions. In architecture, law, health care, engineering, journalism, and such, employees are freer to pursue work with many more employers. That means that hiring is more of a matchmaking process and that professionals have more of an opportunity to weigh the appeal of competing work cultures, job descriptions, and organizational policies. Look, I don't want to romanticize things. Everyone works in places where they sometimes disagree with practices or policies. But in schooling, we've turned this unavoidable "sometimes" into an expectation—even a feature. Indeed, a decade ago, in The Cage-Busting Teacher, I talked at length about how this sense of trapped resignation can be pervasive even among recognized and accomplished educators.

Just as it's good for families to be free to find schools that best serve their kids, it's good when educators can find institutions where they can do their best work. Expanding the palette of choices does that. And, while charter schools can help, they've proved to be limited in their ability to foster a robust array of learning environments, schedules, instructional models, and staffing arrangements. New publicly funded education options, like vouchers and ESAs, have a lot of potential to expand the array of promising possibilities.

Private choice is facilitating the emergence of hybrid schools, microschools, and models of career and technical education that would be a bear for a district to incorporate. It can loosen the grip of school board politics in ways that allow school leaders to raise expectations for student behavior, parental engagement, or faculty performance. This holds the promise of offering educators new career paths, more welcoming environments, and new leverage when frustrated by their current working conditions.

Alex: Fantastic points, Rick. Educators would benefit from more employment options. I'll add some practitioner color before revisiting your voucher and ESA idea.

Fundamentally, educating is a creative act, but teaching is among the most constraining jobs around. Teaching can feel like Groundhog Day: Educators have an identical schedule day after week after month, and school days turn into a school daze. Plus, many districts expect teachers to use scripted curricula with fidelity. While such curricula raise the instructional floor, they can also lower the ceiling for strong educators who want to teach content their way. Finally, teachers are beholden to thorny district policies around discipline, phones, political speech, etc. In short, teaching is awesome, but being a teacher often sucks.

Overall, Rick, you cogently argue that current employment options stultify educators, but I'd extend the argument: Inflexible work arrangements also create an artificially narrow teacher pool. It takes a very specific type of professional who can handle a stiff daily schedule, an ossified step-and-lane pay structure, and a retirement model that incentivizes geographic immobility over a 25-year career. Thus, our current instructional corps is more dispositionally homogeneous than the true potential teaching pool. So many incredible adults would love to teach but avoid it due to the profession's inflexible mold. Thus, with more employment options, benefits would accrue not only to current educators but also result in a supply of teachers who better reflect student variability. When more kids can identify with their teachers, we see increased student learning, belonging, and other desirable outcomes.

So I'm with you on the problem. And it's even worse post-COVID, since public schools' rigidity is anathema to the professional flexibility many people now seek. But I'm less clear and more wary of the voucher-ESA solution you discussed. I'd love to see our public system change rather than transitioning to a more privatized model, which would further undercut public school investment.

And to me, it seems that the tax-credit scenario could eventually blur the lines between the public and private systems in ways that promote less flexibility than we now imagine. Why? Well, public money comes with public accountability. Right now, charters often fail to sustain innovative practices because

they have to perform on public accountability metrics, which over time leads charters to adopt similar traditional practices from which they initially sought to deviate. If we pass a tax credit, wouldn't citizens also demand accountability from expanded vouchers and ESAs? And might that accountability have a homogenizing impact in private settings similar to the impact seen in charters? A tax credit may actually threaten the heterogeneity it aims to create, thus diminishing the potential degree of educator flexibility you described.

Rick: You raise some crucial points. I'll respond to a couple big ones and then I want to talk a bit more about an odd tension—the way the education profession's ardent commitment of public management has stifled the professional opportunities of educators.

First, it'd be great if traditional systems were able to reimagine the profession. The problem is that these systems, governed by elected officials and squeezed by competing constituencies, tend to be stymied by policies and contracts. Indeed, the changes that both "reformers" and unions have championed have tended to add new layers of administrivia—including new teacher-evaluation systems, mandatory DEI training, limits on classroom discipline, and the like.

Second, you're right that ESAs and vouchers are likely to be accompanied by a desire for more public oversight. That's certainly reasonable, when public funds are at stake, as is the expectation that these providers be transparent about their finances and outcomes. And, as with charter schools, performance-based accountability may be in the cards. But none of this is necessarily as constraining as the kinds of operational mandates that suffuse district schools when it comes to seat time, curricula, compensation, scheduling, certification, and the like.

Third, it's unhelpful to romanticize either "public" or "private" schooling. That said, a big challenge for traditional school districts is that their longevity means they're burdened by decades of accumulated rules and regulations, contracts and cultures. I'd love to see that changed. But it's incredibly difficult to unwind these things once they're enmeshed in an organization's DNA. That's why I've always talked about the possibilities of "greenfield education," which gives educators and communities the chance to stand up new schools.

But I want to take just a moment to talk concretely about what it might mean to move away from a one-size-fits-all professional model. In professions like health care or engineering, it's common to encounter professionals who work part time because it's what makes sense given their current life situation. Such an option is almost nonexistent for educators. Certification, staffing practices, and teacher-of-record requirements mean that teachers are typically either full time or out of luck. This is especially self-destructive for a profession that's seeking to recruit and retain young parents.

In most professions, there are organizations that reflect a variety of cultures, schedules, and calendars. This creates room for those with different circumstances to find a suitable fit. In traditional school districts, there's far less room for any of that. State laws, district policies, and collective bargaining agreements tend to ensure that traditional school districts put students and teachers on a schedule that would be familiar to a factory worker in 1925. This can be a poor fit for working professionals in 2025.

We've seen a proliferation of new educational staffing models, like New Classrooms, Opportunity Culture, or the Next Education Workforce. While a big part of the promise of these models is that they make it possible to rethink professional responsibilities and turbocharge the compensation of impactful educators, the reality is that existing contracts and policies sharply limit how these models play out today. I'd love to see schools have a freer hand to start courting polished educators and accomplished mentors with $250,000 offers, the same way we see professionals courted in law or higher education.

Anyway, that's my two cents from where I sit on the policy side of the house. What say you, my friend?

Alex: I'll close with my three cents (thanks, inflation) on why educators get stuck in a public-management mindset.

As your greenfield thinking suggests, people get stuck in what they know; to shift mindset, people have to see another way. For example, a teacher may think his students are incapable. As an instructional coach, I always make the same move: Bring the original teacher to a stronger teacher's classroom who's effective with the same kids. This exposes a hard truth: It's not the kids but the teaching that's the problem. When the teacher sees "incapable" kids succeed, it shifts their mindset.

Let's connect that to educators' public-management mindset. Educators must see the benefits of private options—beyond what they get from unions—to shift our public bias. Unions acquire political power through, well, unity—etymologically, unions are about sticking together as one. The idea of diversified contracts and pay scales threatens the enterprise. As a former NEA member, I found that union leadership clearly conveyed the benefits of collective action but underplayed the costs. Thus, public educators may not see the unfavorable externalities built into their collective bargaining agreements, like how many teachers never receive equal benefit from their retirement contributions or how a universal job description limits flexibility. For teachers to transcend a public-management mindset, groups like Next Education Workforce need to demonstrate benefits beyond what unions offer. If such groups can combine flexible models with strong pay, I think more public educators would be game to test the nonpublic waters.

Personally, while I have supported public charters, I've been more tepid on private choice. One reason I—along with parents and policymakers—may balk at alternatives is that vouchers, for-profit schools, online schools, and other models often produce lackluster results for kids. Tax credits could encourage experimentation that could yield better outcomes, but experimenting with kids' futures feels risky, especially when most parents like their local school. To expand the embrace of choice, private options need to better mirror the gains posted by public charters.

To be clear, I agree with you that educators deserve more employment optionality. And I may have to be more risk-tolerant regarding private choice experiments, even if some educators and students are disadvantaged by ineffective actors along the way. But fundamentally we agree: If we look squarely at the disadvantages of our current system—for both kids and educators—then preserving the status quo seems riskier than disturbing it. ■

Rick Hess is the director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute and the author of Education Week's Rick Hess Straight Up *opinion blog. He is the creator of the annual RHSU Edu-Scholar Rankings.*

Lexia®

100% Trained: How a Successful Implementation Brought the Science of Reading To Secondary Schools

Tiffany Goodman is passionate about literacy. As director of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support at Friendship Public Charter Schools in the Washington, D.C., area., Goodman oversees the charter network's eight middle schools and high schools, where she aims to help all students become successful readers through the science of reading.

But when Goodman started at Friendship in 2023, in the aftermath of the pandemic, the majority of middle and high school students were reading below grade level.

Discovering the Disconnect

To close that opportunity gap, Goodman turned to her data. According to teacher performance data and evaluations, some teachers were being rated as highly effective on the district's instructional rubric—but student scores were still low. Goodman recognized the disconnect there—a need for professional learning that bridged the gap between high-quality instructional moves and best practices in reading.

"When I think about the students, it starts with the teachers. We have to provide them with targeted professional development. I believe that Lexia Aspire® [Professional Learning] is providing that quality professional development that's needed for our scholars and our teachers in order for the teachers to then go into the classroom and deliver high-quality instruction that moves reading outcomes," Goodman said.

Now, one year into a four-year science of reading implementation plan, Goodman's story is an example of a thorough and flexible implementation that has both administrators and educators looking forward to the following year.

Recommendations for Implementing Science of Reading at a Secondary Level

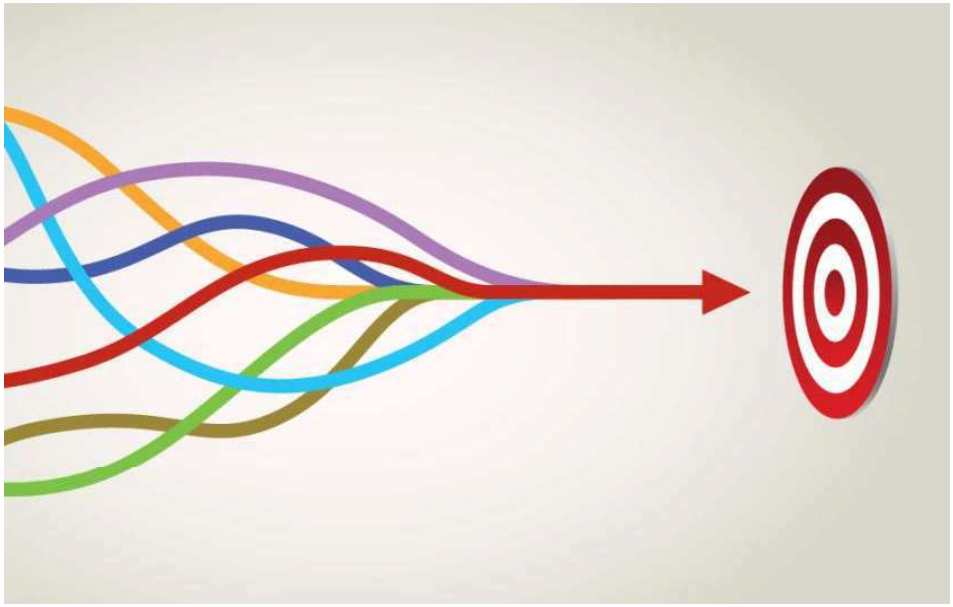
Based on her own experience with implementing this across-the-board curriculum, Goodman recommends these steps:

1. Start at the top by developing a local literacy plan.
2. Develop a school science of reading implementation plan that includes related committees.
3. Conduct focus groups for feedback.
4. Leverage teachers and staff leadership to develop and implement the school plan.
5. Utilize Lexia Success Partnerships for resources and support.
6. Stay actively engaged with reviewing and analyzing student literacy data to inform instruction and decision-making.
7. Create systems of accountability—celebrate wins, lead with love, and offer support—as schools and districts shift to a science of reading culture.

In this way, Goodman and other educational leaders are infusing the science of reading across the Friendship Public Charter Schools community, and she can't wait to see where they'll be three years from now.

"We still have work to do with closing the achievement gap but we're on the right track," she said. "There's no program I would use other than Lexia®."

> I love the Lexia programs and will remain a dedicated Lexia customer. I particularly appreciate the Lexia Success Partnership team and their support of the 6–12 literacy programs and professional learning, and the blended learning literacy model at FPCS.
>
> — Tiffany Goodman, Director of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, Friendship Public Charter Schools



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OPINION

Published August 06, 2024

What Is the State of School Choice?

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an explosion in school choice. Will it last?

By Rick Hess

School choice has made historic strides since the start of the pandemic, with states adopting (or expanding) education savings accounts (ESAs) and school vouchers at a head-spinning pace. This has been cause in some quarters for celebration and in others for fury. But I wanted to set aside the back-and-forth for a moment to go deeper into what we're seeing in legislation and what we're seeing in the research. For that kind of conversation, one of the first people I'm inclined to turn to is Patrick Wolf, the 21st Century Endowed Chair in School Choice at the University of Arkansas. Wolf has authored scores of scholarly articles on school choice and has led multimillion-dollar school choice research teams in places like Milwaukee and the District of Columbia. Here's what he had to say.
—Rick

Rick: As someone who's been studying school choice for nearly three decades, what do you make of the legislative activity we've seen the past few years?

Patrick: I'm surprised and impressed with the speed and scope of the school choice wave since 2020. I think many members of the education establishment—the teachers' unions, National School Boards Association, etc.—underestimated the level of disappointment parents had with long school closures and low-quality remote instruction during the pandemic. The establishment seemed to be caught flat-footed by the expansive private school choice bills proposed and enacted in the pandemic's wake. In June, the advocacy group EdChoice announced that more than 1 million students are enrolled in a private school choice program. That's a doubling of private school choice enrollments in less than four years. Amazing!

Rick: How much of what we're seeing is a gradual evolution and how much is a fundamental shift in the political firmament?

Patrick: It's a combination of both factors. Some states, like Florida, Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin, have gradually and persistently expanded their school choice enrollments over the past decade. Other states have gone from zero to 60 in mere seconds. For example, West Virginia went from having no private school choice to enacting a universal education savings account program in 2021. Arkansas had a disability voucher program that enrolled 600 students and a tax-credit scholarship program that supported an additional 300 before it enacted a universal ESA program in 2023. The first fundamental shift was moving from narrowly targeted programs to universal eligibility, and the second shift was transitioning from vouchers or private school tuition scholarships to ESAs that allow parents to fully customize their child's education with services from multiple vendors.

Rick: You mentioned that one reason for the increased demand for choice programs was pandemic-era school closures and low-quality remote instruction. Now that the pandemic is behind us, do you expect this demand to persist?

Patrick: I think it will. Parents can't unsee what they saw on their children's screens during the remote learning debacle. In some cases, it was unchallenging material. In other cases, it was objectionable material. Parents of over a million students decided that their children deserved better than that and opted for private schooling or some variant of home schooling, such as "pandemic pods." Many public school leaders naively assumed that those students would return to the public school fold after the pandemic, but that hasn't happened to the extent those leaders expected. District-run public schools remain over a million students short compared with their 2019 enrollment level, which is certain to be a high-water mark for them. I don't think those levels will ever be reached again.

Rick: Let's talk about what we're learning. For starters, what do we know about school choice today that we didn't know 10 or 20 years ago?

Patrick: We know that the educational attainment benefits of school choice are larger and more consistent than the educational achievement benefits. In other words, choice programs boost how far a student goes more than how much they know. We don't know why that is the case, but we suspect it is because private schools of choice are highly responsive to parents and because most parents want schools to help them instill good habits in their children such as grit, persistence, and conscientiousness. Better character development would also explain recent findings that school choice

has some positive effects on reducing criminal behavior and student mental health problems. We also know conclusively that competitive pressure from choice programs improves the performance of public schools.

Rick: I suspect that choice skeptics would disagree with your assertion that school choice boosts outcomes in public schools. Can you expand on that a bit?

Patrick: The basic theory of markets holds that pressure from competing organizations drives existing organizations to improve their performance. Some choice skeptics claim that isn't true in K–12 education because, um, children! Thirty-seven different scholars have conducted 31 separate studies of the competitive effects of private school choice programs on the test-score outcomes of students who remain in affected public schools. Twenty-seven of those studies conclude there are at least some positive effects. These are rigorous evaluations from prominent social scientists at Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, the University of Rochester, and even the University of Arkansas! Three studies conclude there are no significant effects either way. Only one study, done by a doctoral student at Indiana University, concludes that the effect of competition from school choice on public schools is negative. The record of the school choice competitive effects hypothesis is 27 wins, 3 ties, and 1 loss. That's a wipe out. A separate group of scholars recently combined all the findings in a statistical meta-analysis, or a "study of all the studies." Unsurprisingly, they concluded that private school choice programs have a positive competitive effect on the performance of public schools.

Rick: What are some of the research findings that you think are most relevant to the public debate about school choice today?

Patrick: The ones from my research, obviously! Seriously, though, the consistent findings that public schools respond to choice-based competition in positive ways are vital because, even with the expansion of private school choice programs, most students will attend public schools. Polls consistently show that around 70 percent of Americans favor private school choice programs. Support is strongest among African American parents of school-age children. We see that most parents are comfortable sending their child to a public school but want private school choice programs to be available to them in case they need to pivot to that alternative. We've also learned that intrusive government regulations scare away good schools from choice programs, so light-touch regulation is the way to go.

Rick: Especially in an era of polarization, there's much interest in how choice may affect the ability of schools to promote democratic virtues. This is a question you've examined. What's your take on what the research says about this?

Patrick: I've heard many claims that private schooling is a threat to our democracy. My research team recently set out to test those claims by conducting a meta-analysis. We identified 57 studies with 531 statistical findings about the relationship between private schooling or private school choice and four general types of civic outcomes. Throughout these studies, private schooling was associated with higher levels of political tolerance, political knowledge, and community engagement, and levels of political participation among private school students and graduates were comparable to public school students and graduates. Private schooling is a boost, not a bane, to the vibrancy of our democratic republic. The benefits of private schooling in boosting political tolerance are especially vital, as we need to be able to disagree with others without being disagreeable—or, in the extreme, committing political violence.

Rick: It seems to me that the breadth and rigor of school choice research has grown over time. Is that a fair characterization?

Patrick: The days of the big field studies that Paul Peterson and I conducted might be over. Most of those studies relied on over-subscription lotteries to produce "gold standard" findings on the participant effects of school choice. Over-subscription is rare in this latest wave of universal choice programs, so recent evaluations have settled for complicated "silver standard" methods that involve matching students on key background factors. More researchers are studying an increasingly broad set of school choice questions, including "Who participates in choice programs?," "Why and how do families choose private schools?," "How are these programs best regulated?," "What are the effects of school choice programs on the funding of public schools?," and "How do public schools respond to competition from choice?" Researchers are producing evidence about more aspects of school choice, but much of that evidence is coming from studies with less rigorous research designs than the previous school choice experiments.

Rick: One of the things I've always admired about your work is your utter willingness to report negative findings even though you're broadly supportive of choice. Can you talk about a few of those negative findings and the reception they received?

Patrick: I'm the only scholar of private school choice to report positive, neutral, and negative effects of choice programs. I am an evaluator at heart. I apply the most rigorous study designs possible under the circumstances and simply go where the data lead me. The real world is complicated and messy, rarely yielding absolutely consistent results. Usually, the data point to a mix of neutral and positive effects of choice. My team's evaluation of the Louisiana Scholarship Program was an exception. Policymakers built heavy government regulations into that program because they expected that mostly low-performing private schools would participate. That became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Higher-performing private schools looked at the deal being offered to them and said, "No thanks." The program was launched in 60 days in a mad scramble, and the students who switched to the few participating private schools experienced large test-score drops in the first year, which narrowed somewhat but persisted after four years. That study is heavily cited by school choice opponents, even though it is an atypical case. The Louisiana program was replaced by a better-designed universal ESA program in June.

Rick: More generally, as a scholar who's seen as broadly supportive of school choice, what kind of reception do you get in the research community? Has that changed over time?

Patrick: A decade ago, the American Educational Research Association, no friend to school choice, included an essay about me in their newsletter. They said, "Wolf is a well-known advocate for school vouchers. He bases his advocacy on the research." Well, yes, I do! Recently, as education policy debates have become more politically charged, some people in the field have reverted to baseless claims that my research is biased. Increasingly, anonymous peer reviews of my studies have little to do with the quality of the research methods and data. Instead, they betray a strong political bias against school choice. That simply

means that it takes longer to find a journal with a responsible set of editors and reviewers. Then, the article gets improved, accepted, published, and heavily cited.

Rick: OK, final question. For educators, whatever their views on school choice, what's one takeaway that's really useful to keep in mind as they engage with parents and public officials?

Patrick: I'm greatly impressed by public school leaders and educators who say, "School choice is the new reality. We strive to be the school of choice for parents and students in our community." That's the spirit! Those highly responsive public schools view parents as allies and see education as a team sport. Public schools that are responsive to parents tend to hold onto their enrollments and, in some cases, grow them. We all should want the children of our country to be in schools that effectively serve their needs. That's what public education, whether provided by a public or private school, should be all about. ■

Rick Hess is the director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute and the author of Education Week's Rick Hess Straight Up *opinion blog. He is the creator of the annual RHSU Edu-Scholar Rankings.*

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