



PSEA School Choice Analysis and Research

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Introduction

For decades, proponents of private school choice programs have claimed that private schools can increase students' academic performance and do it more cost effectively than public schools. But time and time again, research has shown that these claims are either wildly overstated or demonstrably false. In state after state and program after program, students who have used vouchers or voucher-like programs to attend private schools do not perform better than public school students. An analysis of those same programs illustrates that they don't save money either. Rather, the costs of private school voucher programs tend to explode over time while offering no reductions in the cost of operating public schools.

As of the end of February 2024, there were 77 private school choice programs in the U.S. This count includes all types of private school choice programs: traditional voucher programs, state-funded education 'savings' accounts (ESAs), and tax credit/tax deduction programs. Thirty-two states, along with Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico, had at least one such program.¹ States often had more than one – and so Pennsylvania, with the Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) and Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit (OSTC) programs, is not unusual in this respect.

The number of school choice programs increased by 15 between May 2019 and February 2024. Over a nine-month period in 2023 (February through October), seven states passed either statewide private school choice programs or programs for specific groups of students; 10 other states removed income limitations on or otherwise expanded existing programs.²

This paper will discuss:

1. **The Student Success Fallacy:** School choice programs have generally been shown to reduce students' educational outcomes and attainment; analysis that does show improvement usually indicates that the improvement is not sustained.
2. **The Economic Fallacy:** Promised savings fail to materialize. In fact, rather than saving money, costs rise, sometimes precipitously, after school choice programs are introduced.
3. **Discrimination and Violation of Students' Rights:** School choice programs foster conditions that allow students' rights to be violated and permit discrimination.
4. **Waste, Fraud, and Abuse; Lack of Oversight, Accountability, and Appropriate Fiscal Controls:** School choice programs have been associated with corruption, waste, and abuse due to lack of oversight, accountability, and appropriate fiscal controls.
5. **School Choice Programs Lack Public Support:** School choice programs lack public support in opinion polling and referenda that have been held over a period of more than 25 years.

¹ Congressional Research Service (2024)

² National Coalition for Public Education (2023a)

Part One – The Student Success Fallacy

Conclusions about the impact of private school programs on student achievement have evolved as researchers have had additional time and opportunity — and data — to assess private school choice programs, including attributes of students who are eligible for and use them. Initial analyses generally supported the notion that school choice programs succeeded in improving students' test scores and educational attainment.

The most recent generation of empirical studies — studies that assess programs in Louisiana, Indiana, Washington, D.C., and Ohio — shows large *negative* effects of private school choice programs. Generally, the research indicates that the effects are especially damaging for math.

The most recent analyses, however, consistently depart from the notion that school choice programs improve student achievement. Results have turned, decidedly and sizably, against the effectiveness of school choice programs. The best, unbiased analysis rarely shows that school choice programs produce positive effects; on the rare occasion that it does, it does not show that those positive effects are sustained. The most recent generation of empirical studies — studies that assess programs in Louisiana, Indiana, Washington, D.C., and Ohio — show large *negative* effects of private school choice programs. Generally, the research indicates that the effects are especially damaging for math.

1.1 Evaluation of programs in Louisiana, Indiana, Washington, D.C., and Ohio

For the Louisiana Scholarship Program (LSP), research published in refereed journals concludes that:

- LSP participation lowers math scores and reduces achievement in reading, science, and social studies;³
- use of an LSP scholarship negatively affects both English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics achievement;⁴
- attending an LSP-eligible private school was associated with large, negative effects for reading, science, and social studies, and especially large, negative effects for math;⁵
- results indicate large, negative effects of LSP voucher usage after four years, especially in math;⁶
- analysis indicates substantial negative achievement impacts, especially in math, that diminish after the first year but persist after four years;⁷ and
- LSP-eligible private schools experience rapid enrollment declines prior to entering the program, indicating that the LSP may attract private schools struggling to maintain enrollment (and so casts doubt on the quality of schools participating in the program).⁸

³ Abdulkadiroğlu, Pathak, & Walters (2018)

⁴ Mills & Wolf (2017)

⁵ Abdulkadiroğlu, Pathak, & Walters (2015)

⁶ Mills & Wolf (2019)

⁷ Erickson, Mills, & Wolf (2021)

⁸ Abdulkadiroğlu, Pathak, & Walters (2015)

In Indiana's private school choice programs:

- those moving to schools via private choice programs fared the worst, with students who switched to Catholic schools experiencing large annual losses in mathematics;⁹
- private school choice students experienced a large loss in mathematics during their first year of attending a private school compared to matched students who remained in a public school; the loss persisted regardless of the length of time spent in a private school;¹⁰ and
- participating students experienced a large annual loss in mathematics after attending a private school compared with matched public school students; in both math and ELA, voucher students who exit private schools and return to public schools experienced modest to substantial achievement losses during their time in participating private schools.¹¹

In Washington, D.C.'s Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP):

- participation in the OSP had a statistically significant negative impact on the mathematics achievement of students offered or using a scholarship;¹² and
- an evaluation of the OSP found that students in their first year in the program had worse achievement in math than students who applied for the program but did not receive a voucher.¹³

In Ohio's EdChoice program, students who left relatively high-achieving public schools for private schools performed worse on statewide tests than they would have if they had remained in the public schools.¹⁴

In an analysis that used National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data, students attending private schools failed to outperform public school students, a result that is consistent with the broader finding that, after controlling for the fact that private school students tend to be more privileged, public school students performed at least as well as private school students on national standardized tests.¹⁵

1.2 Criticism of pro-private school choice researchers

Joshua Cowen, Professor of Education Policy at Michigan State University and one of the foremost academic experts on the effectiveness and effects of private school choice policies, unequivocally criticizes the process and network through which research that supports the effectiveness of private school choice programs is disseminated.

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"The entire [emphasis added] base of evidence to support school vouchers comes from a small, interconnected and insular group of research-activists with direct ties to Betsy DeVos, Charles Koch, the Waltons [Wal-Mart] and other privatization financiers."

⁹ Berends & Waddington (2018)

¹⁰ Waddington & Berends, (2018)

¹¹ Waddington & Berends (2017)

¹² Dynarski, Rui, Webber, & Gutmann, B. (2018)

¹³ Dynarski & Rui (2017)

¹⁴ Figlio & Karbownik (2016)

¹⁵ Lubienski & Lubienski (2010)

interconnected and insular group of research-activists with direct ties to Betsy DeVos, Charles Koch, the Waltons [Wal-Mart] and other privatization financiers.¹⁶

“There is credible research on one side — that vouchers are largely a negative force for student outcomes — and politically oriented reports on the other. That’s it.”¹⁷

The only researchers finding positive effects of voucher programs are those whose funding is dependent on contributions from those (listed above) who are the strongest advocates and the most outspoken proponents for vouchers. Or, as Cowen puts it: “[T]he case for vouchers relies entirely on data and evidence contributed by what amounts to industry-funded research and advocacy on behalf of the cause.”¹⁸

1.3 Other important conclusions

Research into private school choice programs found no difference in the likelihood of entering or enrolling in college¹⁹ or four-year degree attainment after enrolling in college between students who were awarded scholarships to attend private schools and students who were not.²⁰ Thus, as indicated in section 1.1 above, private school choice programs generally fail to produce achievement gains for students in elementary and secondary schools (just the opposite, in fact), and they are not shown to produce or indicate advantages in continuing to access education opportunities beyond primary and secondary years.

Analysis has found that private school choice program students realize “substantial achievement gains,” after returning to public schools (also noted above in the discussion of Indiana’s programs).²¹

For private school choice programs, student performance was found to improve when the programs were required to report test scores of students using public funds to attend private schools²² and when student test outcomes were publicly reported.²³ (“Competition” alone was insufficient.) Public schools are, of course, required to report such scores.

Part Two – The Economic Fallacy

The evidence shows, in program after program and state after state, that private school choice programs do not save money, not at the local level nor (especially) at the state level, as students move from public schools to private schools. In part, this is due to flawed arguments about the cost of educating students in public vs. private schools. It is also due to expansions that occur after programs are established — after they get their foot in the door. Together, the flawed arguments and the alterations constitute the elements of a classic bait and switch.

¹⁶ Cowen (2022)

¹⁷ Cowen (2022)

¹⁸ Cowen (2022)

¹⁹ Chingos & Kisida (2023); Erickson, Mills, & Wolf (2021)

²⁰ Chingos & Peterson (2015)

²¹ Carlson, Cowen, & Fleming (2013)

²² Witte, Wolf, Cowen, Carlson, & Fleming (2014)

²³ Carlson, Cowen, & Fleming (2014)

2.1 School choice program cost savings are overstated or inaccurate

Proponents of school choice programs generate hypothetical cost savings via intentionally misleading math that reflects neither cost (of providing education) realities nor the public school funding mechanisms of most states, including Pennsylvania's. They produce these theoretical savings by arguing that the per student funding for school choice programs is less than the average cost of educating a student at a public school. (Generally, when these arguments are advanced, a statewide average cost figure is used, though sometimes local or district average costs are cited).

In a *Washington Post* opinion piece on April 3, 2024, columnist George Will put it this way: "ESAs [education savings accounts] provide an average of \$7,143 for parents of children leaving traditional public schools to spend on alternatives, including home schooling. Arizona spends about \$13,500 per public school student; if everyone opted for ESAs, the state would save money."²⁴

Depending on the precise nature of the funding formula and the values (parameters or weights) used in the formula, reductions in public school enrollment due to student participation in private school choice programs could well reduce public school revenue more than the small reduction in costs that occurs when students leave for private school choice programs. Thus, the public school enrollment leads to a net loss for public schools rather than the gains promoted by proponents of private school choice programs. And, of course, any reduction in state aid that exceeds reduction in the cost of providing public education must be covered by increases in local revenue.

An analysis of private school choice programs in Wisconsin showed that school districts where one percent of students left for private school choice programs would lose an average of four percent of state aid; school districts where five percent of students enrolled used private school choice programs would lose an average of 15 percent of state aid.

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2.2. The bait and switch; expansion to "universal" private school choice programs

The so-called "universal" programs are particularly costly and burdensome. Universality typically has two components: relaxing or eliminating family income limits and allowing students who attend private schools — students who may never have attended public schools — to qualify for the programs.

Program universality increases the pool of potential participants, further reducing the potential for cost savings (if any at all ever existed). Increases in income limits combined with granting access to private school choice programs to students who never attended public schools have caused program costs to soar. This amounts to a bait and switch of private school choice programs.

²⁴ Will (2024)

²⁵ Brucker, National Education Policy Center (2017)

The bait: A modest program that aids impoverished or low-income students in low-performing schools.
The switch: relaxing income limits and allowing those already enrolled in private schools — all students, not just low-income students in poorly performing schools — to access the program.

Tennessee is a good example of a state that created a program and moved to universality — all in a three-year period. Initially, Tennessee’s program targeted students based on income, then quickly expanded it so that all students were eligible.²⁶

- “In November 2023, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee proposed the Education Freedom Scholarship Act to establish a new statewide education scholarship account (ESA) program. ESAs — also called education savings accounts — are voucher programs that support not only private school tuition but other education-related expenses.”
- “In the first year [2024-25 school year], half of the ESAs would support students whose family’s income is [less than or equal to] 300 percent of the federal poverty line, students with disabilities, and students eligible for Tennessee’s existing Education Savings Account pilot program.”
- “In the 2025-2026 school year, all Tennessee students would be eligible for the ESA program, regardless of their family’s income.”

Research indicates that not all school choice users attended public schools prior to the introduction of the school choice programs. The pressure on legislators and governors is enormous, and the logic or justification to expand private school choice programs to non-public school students is clear (even if the justification to increase income limits — or drop them altogether — to allow students to participate in the programs is not). It has been observed that “[a]cross time, individuals who receive and use a voucher tend to attend a private school prior to applying for a voucher, whereas individuals who apply and are not awarded or who choose not to use an awarded voucher tend to attend public schools prior to applying for a voucher.”²⁷

In Arkansas, only five percent of participants in a new universal school choice program had ever attended public schools. Only 13 percent of students in Florida who registered for an expansion of a school choice program had ever attended public schools. More than half of Arizona’s 2024 program spending will, it is estimated, cover new costs for students who were already enrolled in private schools, homeschooled, or had not started kindergarten.²⁸ Analysis of Wisconsin programs indicated that more than two-thirds of enrollees were already in private schools.²⁹

In the nine-month period between February and October of 2023, five states — Florida, Arizona, Indiana, North Carolina, and Ohio — removed limitations on their school choice programs so that all or nearly all students, regardless of family income, were eligible to participate, and four other states — Arkansas, Iowa, Utah, and Oklahoma — enacted new statewide school choice programs that were available to all students.³⁰

²⁶ Somers (2024)

²⁷ Paul, Legan, & Metcalf, 2007

²⁸ National Coalition for Public Education (2023a)

²⁹ WI Department of Public Instruction, 2013-14 Statewide Choice Program

³⁰ National Coalition for Public Education (2023a)

These changes place enormous strain on state budgets. In Arizona, the new income universality provisions caused program costs to be more than 1,350 percent higher by the 2024 fiscal year than initial estimates indicated (\$950 million compared to the initial estimate of \$65 million).³¹ Florida's fiscal year 2024 program costs were more than 400 percent higher than anticipated (\$3.35 billion rather than \$649 million).³²

2.3. Expansion of Pennsylvania's tax credit programs

An observer who thinks that these same developments — expanded eligibility and exploding costs — will not occur with a private school choice program, like the proposed PASS program, should look to the funding history of Pennsylvania's EITC (Educational Improvement Tax Credit) and OSTC (Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit) programs.

First, the increases in program allocations for Pennsylvania's current school choice programs have been robust. The EITC was capped at \$20 million when it was enacted in 2001-02. The OSTC was added for the 2012-13 fiscal year (and was capped at \$50 million that year). For the 2023-24 fiscal year, the EITC and OSTC programs were capped at a combined amount of \$470 million dollars — \$385 and \$85 million, respectively. Thus, over a 22-year period, the program caps rose from \$20 million to \$470 million, a total increase of 2,350 percent, or about 15 percent per year, on average.³³

Second, it's important to compare the over-time increases in the amounts allocated to each of the two programs. The OSTC was promoted to prioritize and expand opportunities for students from low-income families³⁴ in “low-performing” schools. However, after being introduced in 2012-13, the scholarship program cap was not increased for 10 years. Advocates abandoned it! The program cap was increased to \$65 million in 2022-23 — only a 30 percent increase over a 10-year period — then to \$85 million in 2023-24.

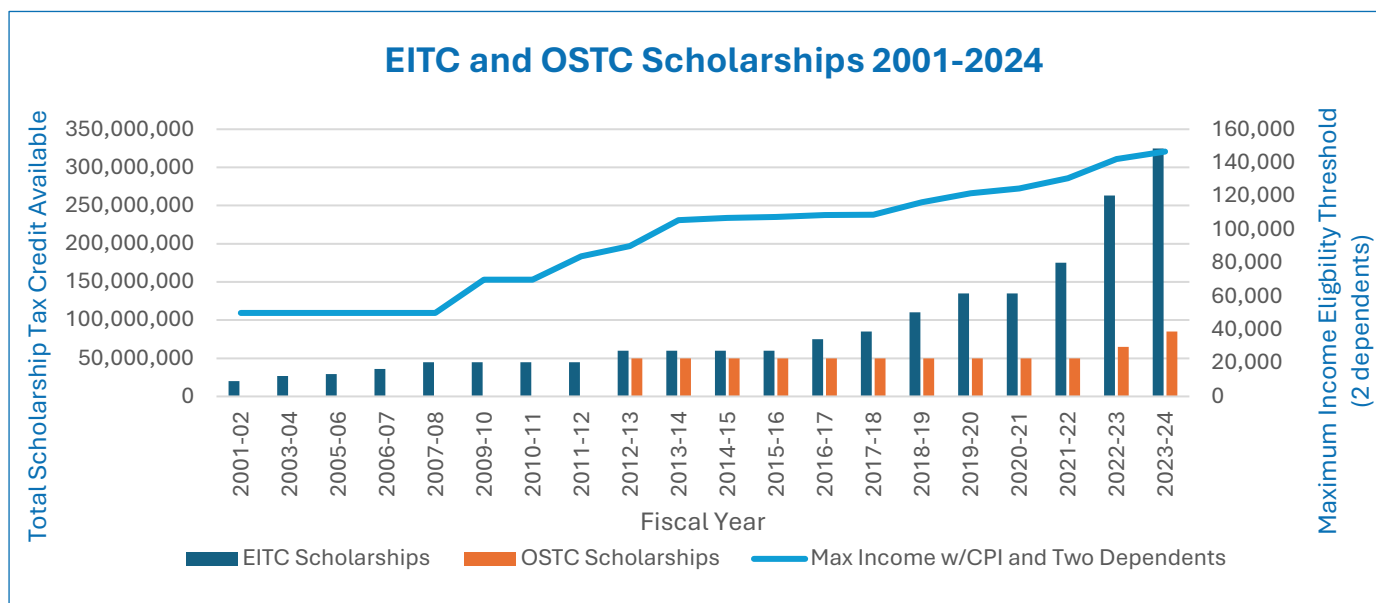
By contrast, for the EITC, which has less restrictive income limits and can be used anywhere in the state (is not limited to Philadelphia or districts in financial recovery), the program amount was increased by \$115 million between 2012-13 and 2021-22. Then, the EITC increased by an additional \$150 million from 2022-23 to 2023-24. Thus, the EITC program increased by \$265 million over that period, while the OSTC program increased by \$35 million. At the end of the period, the amount allocated to EITC scholarship tax credits was four times the amount allocated to OSTC scholarship tax credits.

³¹ National Coalition for Public Education (2023a)

³² National Coalition for Public Education (2023a)

³³ PSEA Research Division computations from Pennsylvania Department of Revenue data

³⁴ The program prioritizes families that earn below 185 percent of the federal poverty level and families that live in Philadelphia or school districts in financial recovery status.



Third, the annual award (“scholarship”) amount for students who receive EITC funds is not capped. Entities that award scholarships in this program can cover the full tuition amount for a non-public school. Conversely, award amounts for students who receive OSTC funds are capped: \$8,500 for regular education and \$15,000 for special education. Which student is more likely to need financial help paying tuition to a non-public school? Which student has less opportunity to get that help?

What is the likely true intent of those who are advocating for funding of the PASS program? To introduce a program that is initially restricted to low-income students in the lowest-performing 15 percent of Pennsylvania’s school districts, then expand it to students in any of the state’s school districts, even if those students’ families can, without the “scholarship,” afford the private or religious school or are already enrolled in such a school. The pattern is clear and obvious, whether it’s a private school choice program in a state other than Pennsylvania or the tax credit program that has existed in Pennsylvania since 2001-02.

2.4. Impact of private school choice dollars on private schools

And, of course, private and parochial schools respond to incentives that arise from new sources of funding and from increases in program amounts and changes in eligibility criteria. New schools open. Schools alter their tuition and fee structure, charging more than they charged (or would have charged, had they existed) before new programs are introduced or existing programs are expanded.

Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) data were used “to test the relationships among organizational liabilities of newness, institutional affiliation, market-share, and regulatory environment on the cumulative risk of school failure.” Using 25 years of data, the authors found that more than 40 percent of all private Milwaukee voucher schools failed. New schools (start-ups) and schools unaffiliated with a larger institution were, comparatively, more likely to fail.³⁵

³⁵ Ford & Anderson (2019)

Another study found a large public-to-private transfer of funds, and suggested “that every dollar of funding increased revenue by a dollar or more” (which occurs when tuition/fees are increased).³⁶ And analysts have noted that if a parent or guardian withdraws a student from private school, the school is permitted to keep the payment, not return it or a portion of it to the program or state (and leaving the student and family with nothing).³⁷

Finally, questions have been raised about the quality of information available to parents and families. Such information is central to making informed school enrollment decisions. Often, research indicates, due to lack of information about school performance, making an informed choice is simply not possible.

For example:

- “... policies often lack robust information dissemination plans and transparency on school quality, leaving many parents with little information to help answer their questions or to understand a school’s level of quality when considering their options;” and
- “... the assumption of private school being an advantage is unclear, and if parents do not have the information on school quality, they are further disadvantaged.”³⁸

Part Three – Discrimination and Violation of Students’ Rights

Voucher programs that funnel public funds to cover private school tuition often are touted as a strategy to increase educational opportunities and expand school choices for students in poverty. In reality, private school tuition voucher programs often only create an illusion of choice, particularly for many low-income students, students of color, and students with disabilities.

In fact, disadvantaged students and students of color are less likely to utilize private school choice programs³⁹ and are less likely to stay when they do use them.⁴⁰ Racial, economic, religious, and achievement factors influence the (initial) decision to utilize a private school choice program and, later, to continue in that program (including to be permitted to continue) or to return to a public school.⁴¹ Students of color were likely disproportionately — in fact, far more likely — to leave a private school choice program.⁴²

... research clearly shows that taxpayer-funded private school choice programs continue to exacerbate racial, class, and disability inequities.

Despite protections put in place after *Runyon v. McCrary* (U.S. Supreme Court, 1976; the Court ruled that private schools that discriminate on the basis of race or that establish racial segregation are in violation of

³⁶ Hungerman & Rinz (2016)

³⁷ National Coalition for Public Education (2023a)

³⁸ Somers (2024)

³⁹ Paul, Legan, & Metcalf (2007); Cowen (2010)

⁴⁰ Cowen, Fleming, Witte, & Wolf (2012)

⁴¹ Waddington, Zimmer, & Berends (2023); Cowen (2023); Howell (2004)

⁴² Cowen (2023); Cowen, Fleming, Witte, & Wolf (2012)

federal law⁴³) research clearly shows that taxpayer-funded private school choice programs continue to exacerbate racial, class, and disability inequities. This occurs for several reasons:

- Private schools have greater freedom than public schools to set policies that impact students with specific racial identities differently than white students. For example, dress codes may prohibit hairstyles that include cornrows, locks, extensions, and head coverings or head wraps, which are more common in communities of color.⁴⁴ In Florida in 2018, a student was refused entrance to a private school he had signed up to attend. The reason given was that his locked hairstyle violated the school's dress code.⁴⁵ In Florida in 2019, a student was pushed out of a school she attended via a private school choice program when she refused to straighten or cut her coiled hair.⁴⁶ While dress codes at both public and private schools have included racialized restrictions such as these, students and families have considerably fewer options for legal recourse in private schools than in public schools.⁴⁷ Tax-funded private school choice programs may provide funds to private schools with policies that restrict access for students of color based upon dress codes and other policies.
- Private schools are permitted to determine their own admissions and enrollment criteria. Many private schools that receive taxpayer (public) funds explicitly deny admission to students based on academics and a general determination of whether a student will “fit” in the school environment. Such selective admissions criteria typically reduce the likelihood that students of color will be admitted to private schools, since students of color are disproportionately disciplined⁴⁸ and disproportionately represented among students scoring below proficient on standardized assessments.⁴⁹
- Private schools are permitted to deny admissions based on general notions of ‘fit.’ Because ‘fit’ is not a clearly defined criterion, it can apply to students with disabilities or other complex learning needs. Black students are 40 percent more likely than other students to be identified with a disability.⁵⁰ Thus, admissions policies that restrict access for students that do not ‘fit’ in the private school environment can disproportionately exclude students of color. Tax-funded private school choice programs may provide funds to schools with policies that restrict access for students with disabilities and other characteristics included in ‘fit.’
- Private schools are able to discipline and expel students for comparatively small infractions of school policy, and students have very limited rights to dispute the action. Students who exhibit challenging behaviors, students who require additional supports to learn effectively, and students who struggle with attendance issues, and students who come with additional characteristics that make them not a good ‘fit’ in a private school setting can be excluded from private schools and therefore from any benefit derived from a tax-funded private school choice program.

⁴³ <https://www.loc.gov/item/usrep427160/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/school-dress-and-grooming-codes-are-the-new-whites-only-signs/>

⁴⁵ Fiddiman & Yin (2019)

⁴⁶ Fiddiman & Yin (2019)

⁴⁷ <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/danger-private-school-voucher-programs-pose-civil-rights/>

⁴⁸ <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2021/10/black-students-harsh-discipline>

⁴⁹ A significant body of research has examined racial disparities in each of these areas. It largely concludes that differences in measures of achievement, disability, and behavior stem from systemic and internalized racism.

⁵⁰ https://nclد.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/2020-NCLD-Disproportionality_Trends-and-Actions-for-Impact_FINAL-1.pdf

- Title IX of the federal Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits discrimination based on sex in any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.⁵¹ Sex-based discrimination has been interpreted to include discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.⁵² Private schools that do not accept federal money (or that receive an exemption based on grounds of conflict with religious tenets) are not required to comply with Title IX. Students who participate in private school choice programs attend schools that legally discriminate based on sex. In Virginia, the grandparents of a private elementary school student were told that the student's enrollment would not be renewed (in the following school year) if she did not alter her hairstyle and dress to more appropriately suit the student's gender assigned at birth.⁵³ In a religious Indiana high school, administrators refused to recognize the transition of a transgender student.⁵⁴
- Public schools cannot, by law, deny admission based on religion or require students to adhere to a certain religious faith. Religious private schools can, however, deny admission to students or, if admitted, require them to adhere to the tenets of the religion of the school they are attending. This may effectively eliminate school choice in places where participating schools fall into a single religious group. In Indiana, more than 90 percent of schools that participated in the state's Choice Scholarship Program were Christian schools.⁵⁵ Public school districts are constrained by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution; they cannot engage in viewpoint discrimination by limiting who can use their facilities or technologies based on the ideology of the person or organization requesting use (or based on the content of the materials they want to distribute when facilities or technologies are used). When public school districts hold their facilities or technologies open for use, they cannot discriminate based on viewpoint, that is allow only those with whom they agree to use facilities or technologies.
- Private school choice program funds often do not cover the full cost of tuition at a private school. This means that students whose families are in the lowest income categories may not benefit from a tuition voucher program because additional tuition and fees must be paid to the school. Students of color are disproportionately members of low-income families, and so are less likely to be able to afford additional tuition and fees, beyond the amounts awarded by program funds, required by private schools.

That private schools exclude students based on characteristics that disproportionately impact some student groups more than others is well established. One study, from 2023, determined that 100 percent of private schools participating in Pennsylvania's EITC and OSTC programs have policies that can be used to discriminate against students in admissions and retention decisions.⁵⁶ It should come as no surprise that research on several private school choice and tax-funded scholarship programs demonstrate increased racial segregation after the policies go into effect.⁵⁷

⁵¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2024)

⁵² Cordle (2017)

⁵³ Fiddiman & Yin (2019)

⁵⁴ Fiddiman & Yin (2019)

⁵⁵ Fiddiman & Yin (2019)

⁵⁶ https://edvoterspa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/EDVO_VOUCHER_REPORT_Dec2023.pdf. Discrimination categories in this document also include religion and LGBTQ+ status.

⁵⁷ <https://tcf.org/content/report/private-school-vouchers-pose-threat-integration/>

In contrast to the exclusive and discriminatory practices of schools that participate in the EITC and OSTC programs, Pennsylvania’s public schools proudly welcome ALL students. A system of transparent protections, checks, and balances are designed to ensure that students are welcome regardless of ZIP code, wealth, disability status, race, LGBTQ+ identity, religion, evidence of prior achievement, ‘fit,’ or any other criteria that may be used to discriminate against students in private school choice programs.

Part Four — Waste, Fraud, Abuse; Lack of Oversight, Accountability, Appropriate Fiscal Controls

Private school choice programs lack fiscal controls, oversight, and reporting requirements that apply to public schools. As a result, they have proven susceptible to corruption and self-dealing (detailed below) by individuals in organizations that receive or pass through school choice program expenditures. A great deal of added oversight (monitoring and compliance staff, for example) is needed to ensure proper (and fair) fiscal responsibility.

North Carolina’s school choice program awarded funds to private schools that were closed at the time funds were awarded, and 62 instances of a school receiving more vouchers than it had students were identified. At least \$2.3 million was lost to fraud.⁵⁸ In 2013, allegations of fraud were substantiated against 25 of 38 Florida program schools. Charges of fraud that were substantiated included falsifying attendance documents to show enrollment of students who did not actually attend the schools and hiring staff with criminal records. Inappropriately used funds totaled about \$49 million.⁵⁹ At least four different cases of corruption have been reported in Milwaukee’s voucher program, including billing for students who never attended participating private schools.⁶⁰

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An audit of Utah’s school choice program found that administrators miscalculated voucher amounts and awarded families thousands of dollars more than the law provided. The administrators of the program also failed to comply with spending rules that legislators had set for the program, including overspending on their own salaries, advertising, and other administrative costs.⁶¹

Arizona’s program permitted parents to spend private school choice program funds on non-educational expenses, including chicken coops, pools, pizza ovens, kayaks, amusement park tickets, and trampolines.⁶² Also in Arizona, due to a lack of oversight, over \$700,000 in beauty supplies, sports apparel, and other non-education related items were purchased in 2018. Most misspent funds were not recouped.⁶³ Florida’s universal school choice program released a purchasing guide that allows funds to be

⁵⁸ Nordstrom (2023)

⁵⁹ Miami New Times (2013)

⁶⁰ Wagner (2013)

⁶¹ Utah Office of State Auditor, Rpt. 23-02

⁶² Hendrie (2023)

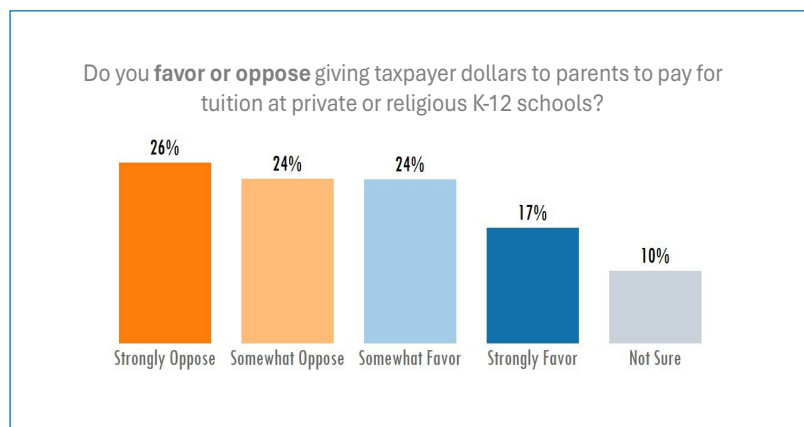
⁶³ Arizona Auditor General (2018)

used for non-educational items, including foosball tables, canoes, garden supplies, meal delivery kits, and amusement park tickets.⁶⁴

Would public schools be permitted to use funds to purchase pizza ovens, beauty supplies, sports apparel (other than school athletic team uniforms), amusement part tickets, and foosball tables? Are they permitted to do so? Generally they are not, because such purchases have been deemed to be an unwise use of taxpayer funds. Funds allocated to education are expected to be used to educate students, not for frivolous or personal purposes. Fiscal responsibility, transparency, and responsibility for misuse and lack of oversight is a clear expectation and requirement of public schools and public school officials. It is reasonable, fair, and responsible that private and religious schools that accept public money, and those who operate those schools, should be subject to similar expectations and requirements.

Part Five – School Choice Programs Lack Public Support

5.1 Lack of public support for private school choice programs in Pennsylvania



A PSEA-sponsored public opinion poll of 710 registered Pennsylvania voters conducted by Susquehanna Polling & Research between February 27 and March 6, 2024, showed that more registered Pennsylvania voters oppose than approve “giving taxpayer dollars to parents to pay for tuition at private or vreligious K-12 schools.”

According to the poll results, 49 percent of voters say they oppose “giving taxpayer dollars to parents to pay for

tuition at private or religious K-12 schools,” while only 40 percent say they support it. Twenty-six percent strongly oppose the idea.

Whether they live in urban, suburban, or rural areas of the state, voters showed a strong preference for investing in community schools rather than providing support to private and religious schools. In urban areas, 47 percent of voters favor community school investments over support for private and religious schools (40 percent). In rural areas, the split is 57 percent to 37 percent, and in suburban areas it is 57 percent to 35 percent.

Opposition was even higher when researchers provided policy alternatives to spending money on vouchers, i.e, making public schools centers for student services that provide before and after care, social support, and tutoring. (<https://www.pageturnpro.com/PSEA/111002-Pennsylvania-Statewide-Omnibus-Poll/sdefault.html#page/24>).

⁶⁴ Florida Step Up for Students (2023)

5.2 Voters in other states defeat private school choice programs

Beginning in 1972 in Maryland and continuing through 2018 in Arizona, referenda on school choice programs were defeated with opposition that ranged from 55 percent opposed (Maryland, 1972) to 89 percent opposed (Washington, D.C., 1981). Ten of 13 referenda were soundly defeated — at least 65 percent, nearly two-thirds, of voters were opposed to the ballot measure.⁶⁵ Three similar referenda (but not school choice program referenda *per se*) were held prior to Maryland’s 1972 referendum; all were defeated.⁶⁶

School Every Choice Program Referendum Has Been Defeated			
State	Year	Description of Program	Percentage of Voters Opposed
Maryland	1972	\$12 million school choice program	55 percent
Michigan	1978	Proposition H: permitted a school choice program	74 percent
District of Columbia	1981	Tuition tax credit	89 percent
Utah	1988	Initiative C; tuition tax credit	70 percent
Oregon	1990	Measure 11: created refundable tuition tax credit	67 percent
Colorado	1992	Amendment 7: all Colorado school finance appropriations, statewide school choice program for use at any school	67 percent
California	1993	Prop 174: “Voucher choice School Program Initiative”; per pupil allotment into voucher	70 percent
Washington	1996	Initiative 173: statewide school choice program	65 percent
Colorado	1998	Initiative 17: tax credit for tuition and home-based education	60 percent
Michigan	2000	Proposal 1: statewide school choice program	69 percent
California	2000	Prop 38: statewide school choice program	71 percent
Utah	2007	Referendum 1: citizens’ veto of school choice program (opposed means program was defeated)	62 percent
Arizona	2018	Proposition 305: legislative veto of voucher program expansion (opposed means the program was overturned)	65 percent
Americans United, “The People Have Spoken: Private School Vouchers Have A Long Track Record Of Failure At The Ballot Box,” 2019, https://www.au.org/the-latest/church-and-state/articles/the-people-have-spoken-private-school-vouchers-have/#			

⁶⁵ Americans United (2019)

⁶⁶ Americans United (2019)

Conclusion

Proponents overstate the benefits and understate the costs of private school choice programs. The reality — the actual effects — of the programs is often far different than the vision offered by program advocates. Publicly funded private school choice programs do not improve student outcomes, tend to be far more costly than anticipated and drain funding from public schools, and are typically structured and funded in ways that deprive students of the full range of their civil and constitutional rights. In the end, these programs do not benefit the students that program proponents typically say they are trying to help — students in low-performing public schools. The programs benefit students in middle-income and wealthy families, many of whom have never been enrolled in public schools. Furthermore, due to lack of oversight, accountability, and fiscal controls, the programs are associated with corruption, waste, and abuse.