

Families Today Have More Schooling Options Than Ever, But Nowhere Near Enough

I am a glass-half-full kind of person, so while we could focus on the criticisms and some of the setbacks related to expanding educational freedom to more families, there is much more to celebrate than to lament. As National School Choice Week kicks off, it's a great time to spotlight the growing variety and abundance of education options available to parents and young people.

In its October 2019 national survey, EdChoice revealed a startling statistic: More than 80 percent of US school-age children attend a public district school, but fewer than one-third of their parents prefer that they go there. This represents a massive choice gap in American education, with many parents still unable to opt-out of a mandatory school assignment in favor of more preferable options. Still, there are signs of hope.

Vouchers, Education Savings Accounts, and Tax-Credit Scholarships

Education choice mechanisms, including vouchers, education savings accounts (ESAs), and tax-credit scholarships, continue to gain popularity in many states. Parents are being re-empowered to determine how, where, and with whom their children are educated. Vouchers enable parents to use a portion of their child's tax dollars allocated for public schools toward tuition for private schools. I recently wrote about the powerful story of Virginia Walden Ford, the Washington, DC, mom who would not accept that her son had to be stuck in a failing district school and pioneered the Washington, DC, voucher program that gives low-income families the ability to exit their assigned school for private options.

ESAs are similar to vouchers in that they enable families to access some of the funds allocated to public schools, but they have the added advantage of separating education from schooling. Rather than only targeting tuition at a private school the way vouchers do, ESAs expand the definition of education beyond schooling, allowing parents to access funds for a wide variety of options, including tutoring, books and resources, classes, and tuition. Tax-credit scholarships, available now in 18 states, enable taxpayers to receive tax credits when they donate to approved non-profit scholarship organizations that then distribute scholarship funds to income-eligible families to use for tuition and other educational services.

The expansion of education choice mechanisms to more families may rely, in part, on how the US Supreme Court rules on the case of *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*. Last week, the Court heard arguments in this case, which exposes the 19th-century anti-Catholic Blaine Amendments that continue to exist in 37 states. This particular case focuses on a tax-credit scholarship established in Montana that allowed taxpayers to

receive a tax credit when donating to a scholarship fund that would distribute those funds to children for private school tuition. Some parents, including the plaintiff, chose to use the scholarship money to send their children to religious schools, which the Montana Supreme Court said violated the Blaine amendment's ban on funds to religious schools.

Writing recently about the case in *The Atlantic*, Nick Sibilla concludes:

In deciding Espinoza, the Court has the opportunity to do more than just settle the fate of one controversial tax credit; it could also junk Montana's Blaine Amendment, finding it in violation of the Constitution's religious-freedom and equal-protection clauses. In doing so, it would set a strong precedent against any law born of bigotry, even if other justifications seem neutral.

Homeschooling

In my Cato policy brief last fall, I found that some of the states with the most robust education choice mechanisms also had a large and growing population of homeschoolers. It makes sense: In an environment where parental choice in education is valued and expected and where a default school assignment is actively questioned, parents feel empowered to make more choices regarding their child's education, and many of them choose homeschooling.

Nationally, homeschooling numbers hover near two million learners who are increasingly diverse along all metrics, including demographics, socioeconomic status, geography, ideology, and educational philosophy and approach. The majority of today's homeschooling families choose this option because they are concerned about other school environments.

Hybrid homeschooling options, which include both private and public part-time programs, enable more families to choose homeschooling by providing some out-of-home, center-based learning and instruction that complements the central role of the family in a child's education.

Charter Schools and Virtual Schooling

Despite periodic disappointments for charter school expansion, their popularity continues to climb. Charter schools are public schools that are often administered by private, usually non-profit organizations. They trade heightened accountability for more autonomy. The US Department of Education reports that the number of charter school students swelled from less than a half-million students in 2000 to three million students in 2016, or six percent of

the overall K-12 school-age population.

According to a new poll ahead of the upcoming presidential primaries, voters are less likely to support Democratic presidential candidates who want to end federal charter school funding. The future of parental choice and educational freedom is bright. Virtual schooling, which is online learning that is often public and tuition-free for K-12 students, is also growing, as is blended learning, which combines online and in-person instruction.

While the education choice gap remains wide, and many families are unable to exercise school choice, education options continue to expand and diversify. Parents are being re-empowered to determine how, where, and with whom their children are educated. Policy and legislative efforts continue to extend access to education choice mechanisms, while entrepreneurs build new models and new marketplaces to catalyze choice and innovation. The future of parental choice and educational freedom is bright.