

Public, Charter, and Private Schools

June 29, 2022



Top Line

1. The US education system is split into three distinct categories of schools.
2. Public schools are the core of our education system.
3. Charter schools have a flawed history and limited evidence of success.
4. Private schools boast better outcomes, but evidence indicates background factors are likely the reason.

We need leaders who will fight to protect and invest in our students instead of diverting funds to alternative schooling programs with mixed results. The strongest evidence points to investing in public schools as the best way to improve outcomes for students.

Backup

1. The US K-12 education system is split into three distinct categories of schools.

- a. Public Schools: Publicly run and funded, they do not charge tuition and cannot reject students. (1)
- b. Charter Schools: Privately run but publicly funded, they do not charge tuition, however, they can select their students so long as they do not discriminate on the basis of socioeconomic status, race, religion, gender, disability, or any other protected class. (1)
- c. Private Schools: Privately run and funded, can charge tuition, can select their students, and are not subject to discrimination restrictions. For example, they can choose to only accept students of one religion. (1)

- d. The vast majority of K-12 students are enrolled in traditional public schools. (2)
 - i. Approximately 85% of students are enrolled in traditional public schools.
 - ii. Around 5% of students are enrolled in charter schools.
 - iii. About 9.2% of students are enrolled in private schools.

2. Public schools are the core of our education system.

- a. Public schools ensure that everyone, regardless of background or family income, gets an education. (2)
 - i. The majority of students in public schools are not white, compared to private schools where over 63% of students are white.
 - ii. Over 80% of students in private schools are non-poor, compared to 63% in traditional public schools, meaning 37% of public-school students are poor or near poor. (Meaning family income is at or less than 25% above the poverty line)
- b. Parents are generally happy with their children's school. 73% of parents said they were completely or somewhat satisfied with their children's education. (3)
- c. 88% of Americans say that K-12 Public schools have some (28%) or a lot of (60%) responsibility for giving students the right skills for the workforce. (4)
- d. Public schools are crucial for socioemotional development which increases high school graduation rates, decreases arrest rates, and improves skills like hard work. This research both highlights the importance of public schools and programs to focus on social and emotional development. (5)
- e. There has been some improvement on international test scores since 1995, but the US does not rank at the top internationally. (6)
- f. Investments in public schools generate real results.
 - i. Research shows progressive funding, where investments are focused towards lower income schools, leads to higher graduation rates and improvements in other schooling outcomes. (7)
 - ii. However, money is not the only solution. Programs to measure efficacy and keep schools accountable have also been shown to improve outcomes for students. (7)

- iii. Research shows that increased spending on higher education and smaller class sizes in K-12 schools increases income growth. K-12 spending results are more complicated, but research supports the idea that spending targeted towards reducing class sizes promotes income growth in those communities. (8)
 - iv. A study focused on long term outcomes for students found that a 10% increase in per-pupil public school funding for K-12 students resulted in 9.5% higher earnings and 6.8% reduction in adult poverty. (9)
 - g. There is wide support for increasing funding for public schools
 - i. 19% of Americans listed funding problems as a major issue with public schools. That was the most common answer and is more than double the next highest answer of bullying which was 7%. (10)
 - ii. A different survey found that when told how much federal and state funding goes to public schools, 60% said that federal and state funding should be increased. (11)
 - h. Across the country bills are being introduced that would divert money away from public schools to allow for ‘school choice.’ These alternative programs harm our public schools and do not have evidence they improve outcomes for students. (12)
 - i. Districts with charter schools and private voucher programs spend less money on public schools per pupil and less money on instruction. Instead, more is spent on administration and bureaucracy. (13)

3. Charter schools have a flawed history and limited evidence of success.

- a. Charter schools are offered as an option for parents to choose a school other than their local public school. Charters are publicly funded but privately operated and legally cannot discriminate against any protected class. (12)
- b. Multiple polls have found that a plurality of Americans support charter schools, especially Black and Hispanic parents. This support fell off when respondents were asked about a program that traded off with public school funding. 58% of Americans opposed a policy that expanded charter schools at the expense of public-school funding. (10)

- i. However, many Americans also believe misconceptions about them, for example 29% said that charter schools can charge tuition, only 27% correctly stated they cannot and 44% did not know. (11)
- c. If more students apply to a charter school than they have capacity for, then they are supposed to employ a lottery system to determine which students they accept. However, reporting has found that they often use 'push-out' techniques to not accept low performing students and to limit the number of special needs students they accept. One study of Los Angeles public schools found that charter schools served 1/3 as many students with severe special needs as public schools relative to their total enrollment. (14)
- d. Research has found that on average charter schools were no better or worse than public schools when it came to improving student achievement. There was some evidence for improvement in math scores among low-income students, but there were also negative effects found for high income students. (15)
 - i. The researchers also found that improvement was associated with factors such as smaller enrollment and ability grouping for Math and English classes. They did not find significant effects for factors unique to charter schools such as decision-making autonomy or being operated by a private entity. (16)
 - ii. This suggests that investments in current public schools to bring down class sizes are more efficient than opening charter schools. The evidence for improvements in charter schools should also be measured due to their ability to select high performing students in some cases.
- e. There is evidence that charter schools improve test scores and long-term outcomes like college graduation in urban areas and for minority students. However, these gains are not necessarily unique to charter schools. (16)
 - i. Policies like increased hours and tutoring for students were shown to increase test scores, but there was no evidence that different autonomy mechanisms led to increased test scores for charter schools.
 - ii. There is also evidence that introducing a charter school can have a negative financial impact on the traditional public schools within that district, and there is little evidence they improve public schools through competition.

- iii. The research finds that charter schools are most effective when the traditional school alternative is struggling. Policy focus should be on improving the schools which can serve all students, especially given the mixed research on charter schools.
- f. There are serious regulatory and accountability problems in charter school programs.
 - i. A report found that despite the fact that every state except Arizona has a ban on for-profit charter schools, more than half of charter schools are run by for-profit companies. (17)
 - They do this by claiming the school is run by a non-profit, while outsourcing most if not all school operations to for-profit companies.
 - These schools cut corners, hire less qualified teachers, and do not stand up to Department of Education guidelines, however, there has not been enough enforcement of those rules.
 - ii. Other reports have found that almost a third of the \$1.79 billion allocated to the Charter School Program from 2006 to 2014 went to schools that failed to open or were closed because of mismanagement. (18)
- g. Charter schools are less efficient. They spend more money on administration and less money on teaching students relative to public schools. (13)
 - i. A study of charter schools nationally found that they spend \$774 more per-pupil on administration and over \$1100 less on teaching relative to public schools.
 - ii. When New Orleans changed all of their public schools into charter schools, administration costs increased 66% and spending on teaching dropped 10%.

4. Private schools boast better outcomes, but evidence indicates background factors are likely the reason.

- a. Private schools boast higher graduation rates and better performance in college relative to public schools. (20) However, those statistics do not tell the whole story.

- b. Private school students are more likely to live in a two-parent household, twice as likely as public school students to have a parent with a graduate degree, half as likely to have parents who did not complete high school, and half as likely to be poor or near poor. (20)
 - i. All these factors have a strong relationship to academic achievement and later life outcomes of children. (21)
- c. Better statistics for public schools are used as a justification for voucher programs that offer tuition assistance for families to send their children to private schools. However, research on these voucher programs has found inconclusive results or that they decrease test scores. (22)
 - i. Some studies have found higher graduation rates and later successes, but more recent evidence have found inconclusive results and cast doubt on those conclusions.
- d. Another study found slight increases in high school graduation and college enrollment for students in a voucher program, but insignificant results on college graduation rates. (23)
 - i. Similar to charter schools, these effects could be caused by smaller classes and more available resources like tutors and counselors. Both of these factors are replicable in public schools with adequate funding, and research generally has not found the private management aspect of private schools is behind these statistics.
- e. There is public support for voucher programs that are phrased as school choice programs, with 56% strongly or somewhat supporting vouchers. (10)
- f. Vouchers only mean ‘school choice’ for some students. For example, voucher programs were used to avoid school integration after *Brown v. Board of Education*. Today, private schools that receive vouchers can discriminate along religious lines, can circumvent policies preventing discrimination on the basis of sex and ability, and limit recourse for students facing racial, sexual orientation, and gender based discrimination. (24)
- g. A voucher program in Indiana was created to save the state money by “only funding a portion of the education.” However, the program ended up creating a deficit of \$93 million over two years. (25)

More Information

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Appendix

Combined scores and ranking across tests in 4 subjects (Math, Reading, Science, and Writing)

	Combined Grade	Combined Rank	Ranked
Massachusetts	907	9	1
New Hampshire	895	17	2
Vermont	894	18	3
New Jersey	903	27	4
Minnesota	884	38	5
Montana	879	41	6
Maine	879	44	7
Washington	877	51	8
Colorado	875	52	9
Connecticut	886	53	10
Wyoming	877	57	11
Pennsylvania	874	60	12
North Dakota	874	61	13
Ohio	872	65	14
Idaho	870	66	15
Wisconsin	874	67	16
Virginia	873	68	17
Maryland	870	75	18
Iowa	868	77	19
Kansas	868	78	20
Nebraska	868	80	21
Utah	872	81	22
Indiana	866	82	23
South Dakota	869	84	24
Illinois	862	94	25
Oregon	862	99	26
Kentucky	859	105	27
Missouri	862	106	28
Florida	858	107	29
Delaware	855	114	30
Texas	859	117	31
Tennessee	855	122	32
Rhode Island	856	123	33
Alaska	850	125	34
North Carolina	854	131	35
New York	852	132	36
Michigan	852	137	37
Georgia	849	140	38
Oklahoma	842	156	39
Arkansas	839	161	40
South Carolina	840	163	41
Arizona	836	167	42
Louisiana	830	171	43
California	829	173	44
Hawaii	829	173	45
Nevada	832	173	46
West Virginia	827	181	47
Alabama	815	186	48
New Mexico	815	194	49
Mississippi	806	199	50

Source: <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>