



School Choice Definitions

School choice means empowering parents with the freedom to choose the best educational environments for their children – from traditional public schools to public charter schools, magnet schools, private schools, online learning, and homeschooling. The following are definitions of school choice policies and programs that are frequently discussed during National School Choice Week. Remember: each state and locality has different policies.

Public School Open Enrollment

Open enrollment policies provide increased education options within traditional public schooling. Open enrollment allows parents to select the best public schools for their children, regardless of where those schools are located. Depending on the state or local open enrollment policy, this means that parents can choose any public school within a district (intra-district school choice), or, in some cases, outside of their home district (inter-district school choice).

Public Charter Schools

Charter schools are independent public schools that are allowed the freedom to be more innovative, while being held strictly accountable for improving student achievement. Charter schools are always public schools and are always tuition-free. These schools are created (chartered) in different ways, depending on state law. Some are opened by school districts, while other states allow mayors, universities, and nonprofit groups to create charter schools. These schools are open to all children – students are selected at random.

Magnet Schools

Magnet schools are public schools that are operated by school districts or groups of school districts. Magnet schools are tuition-free and have a focused theme and aligned curriculum such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM), Fine and Performing Arts, or International Baccalaureate.

Private School Choice

Private school choice programs are created by individual states to give parents greater access to private schools for their children. Some private school choice policies are relatively universal (allowing all children to participate), while others are targeted to assist low- and middle-income families, children who would otherwise attend failing public schools, or children with special learning needs.

Private school choice programs can take several different forms, including:

- Opportunity scholarship programs, also called school voucher programs, which allow parents to use all or part of the tax funding set aside for their children's education to send their children to private schools.
- Education savings accounts, which allow parents to access the state and/or local funds set aside for their children's education for a variety of educational purposes, including private school tuition.
- Tax credit scholarship programs, which allow individuals or corporations to receive tax credits for donating to nonprofit scholarship organizations that offer tuition assistance.
- Personal tax credits and deductions, which allow parents who send their children to private school to receive a state income tax credit, or a deduction, for private school tuition as well as books, supplies, computers, tutors or transportation.

Virtual Schools and Online Learning

Virtual schools are Internet-based academies that teach students entirely or primarily through a rigorous online curriculum. These schools can be state-operated, district-run public schools, public charter schools, magnet schools, or privately operated schools. In some cases, online learning is combined with traditional, in-classroom education, called "blended learning." Publicly-operated virtual schools hold children to the same academic standards and requirements as traditional public schools.

Homeschooling

Homeschooling is the process of parents educating children in the home. This method of education is becoming increasingly popular in the United States, with many homeschooling families participating in local or regional homeschooling groups to augment in-home learning. All states permit homeschooling, and many states require standardized test scores, curriculum approval, and professional evaluation of students.