



OCTOBER 2015



# A School Choice Primer

**G**iving parents and students the ability to choose their school is promoted by supporters as the key to improving American education overall. On the surface, the idea has great appeal. Who, after all, opposes having choices? Indeed, both Republican and Democratic policymakers have embraced school choice in various forms that range from opening up alternatives within the public school system to providing taxpayer dollars to students to take to private schools. School choice is currently showing up in the 2016 presidential race, too, as a major plank in the education platform of several candidates. For this reason alone, American voters should be asking: Does school choice live up to its supporters' claims?

NSBA's Center for Public Education seeks to find an answer in this at-a-glance overview of school choice in all its permutations: choice within the public school system

(magnet and charter schools, inter- and intra-district transfers, and traditional neighborhood schools); choice outside the public schools (private schools, vouchers and tax credits, homeschooling); and virtual schools which can be either public or private. In the following pages, we describe each alternative, provide a quick look at state policies related to it, and calculate the proportion of the school-age population served. Finally, we distill what research says about its impact on student achievement.

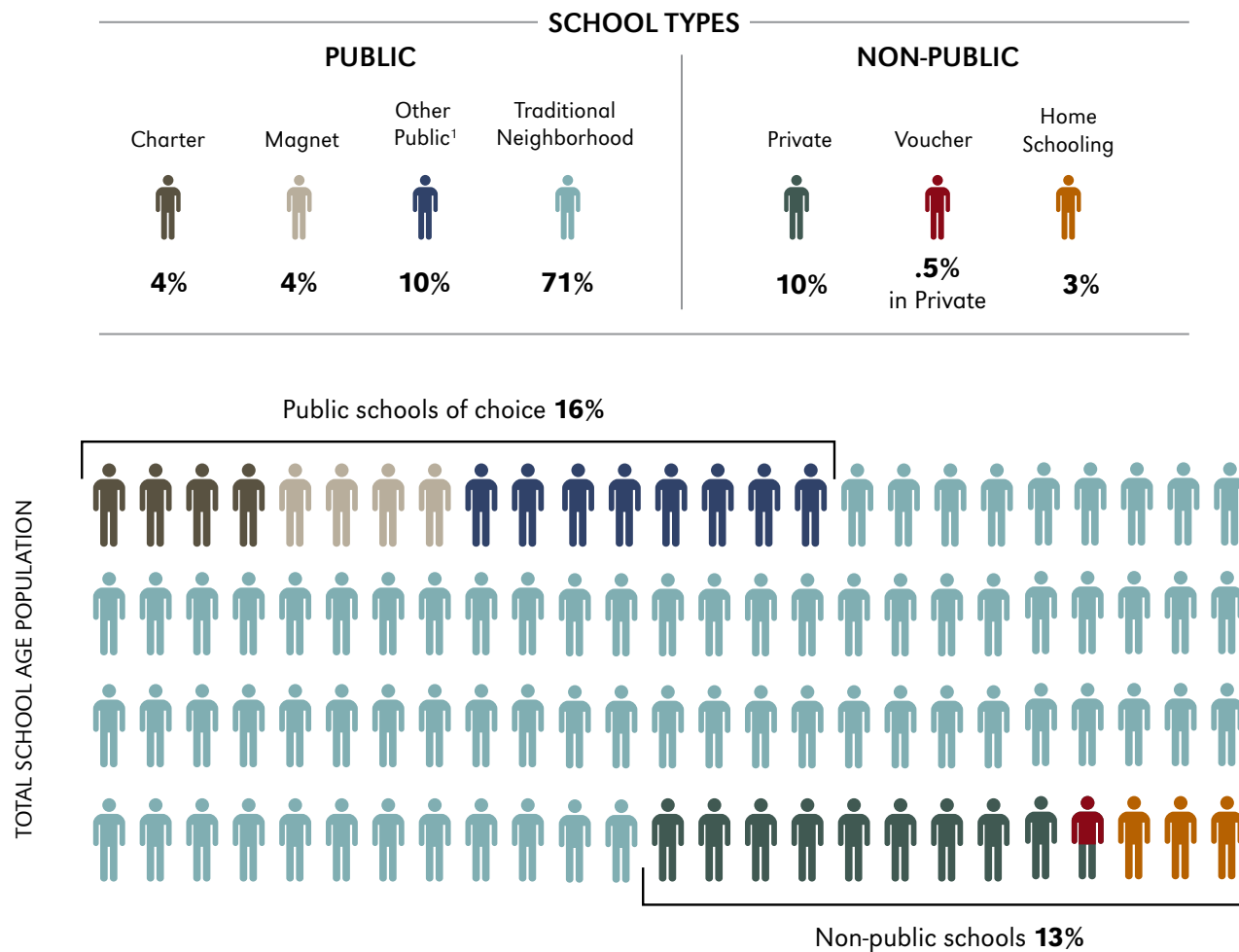
In general, we find that school choices work for some students sometimes, are worse for some students sometimes, and are usually no better or worse than traditional public schools. We hope that this report will inform the ongoing conversation about the efficacy of school choice in the nation's efforts to assure every child is prepared for college, careers and citizenship.

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## REALITY CHECK

After more than two decades of choice policies, enrollments in schools of choice are still relatively small. **87%** of all school-aged children are **in public schools**.



<sup>1</sup>Other public includes inter- and intra-district transfers

## PUBLIC SCHOOLS

### DEFINITION

## Public Schools

Every state provides a free, public education that is available to every school-age child in the state. Every state also has compulsory education laws, typically for children between ages **5-7** & **16-18**.

### STATE POLICY



Public schools must meet all local, state & federal accountability standards.

### ENROLLMENT

Public schools serve **87%** of the school-aged population.

Public School  
Students



## PUBLIC SCHOOLS

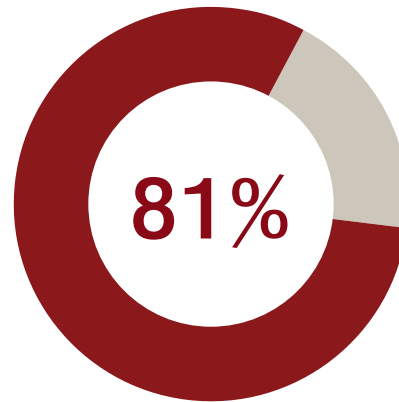
## IMPACT

## Public Schools

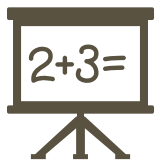
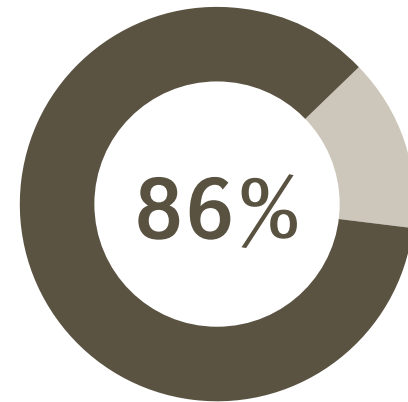
2011-12

By many measures, public schools are performing better than ever. High school graduation rates are at historic highs as is the math performance of 4th and 8th graders. Most public school students still attend traditional neighborhood schools, but they are being given more choices like magnet schools and charters within the public education system.

**81%** of public high school students graduated on time.



By age 24, **86%** had earned a diploma.



Between 2011-13, 4th and 8th grade public school students continued their gains in math; 8th graders also posted gains in reading.

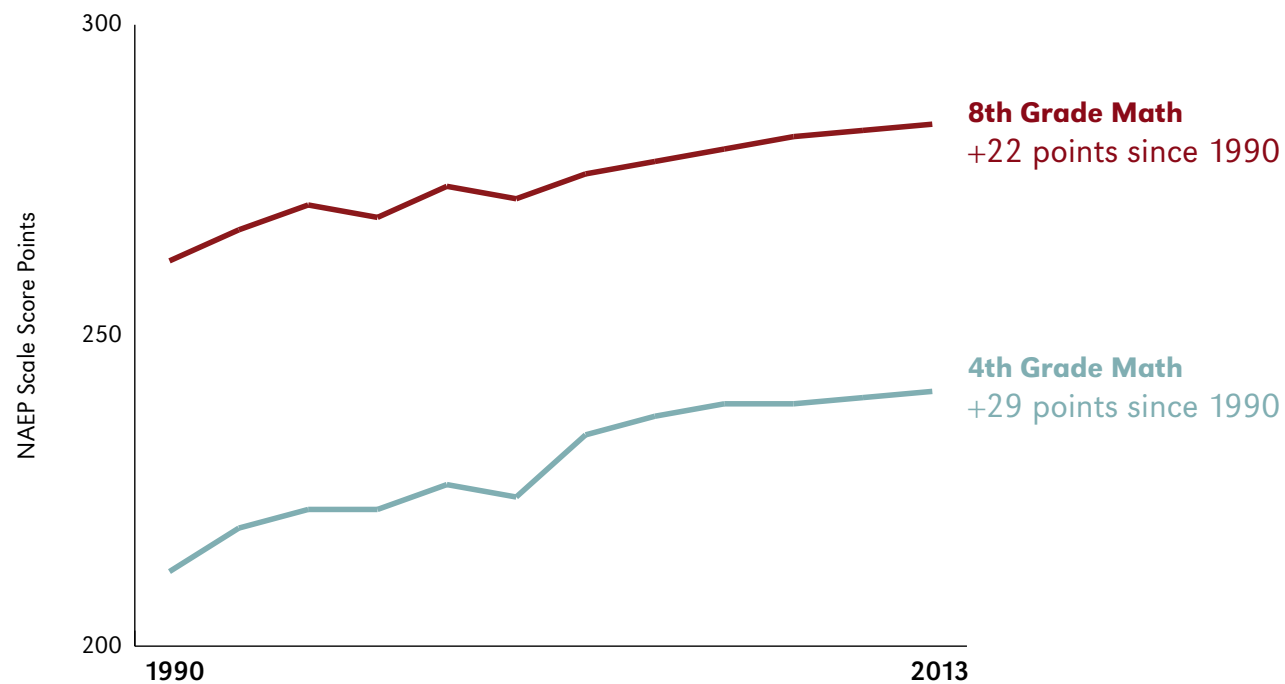
## PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## IMPACT

## Public Schools

### Public School Student Gains on NAEP-Math 1990-2013

Today's public school 4th & 8th graders are performing over two years ahead in math compared to their peers in 1990. They are reading about a half year ahead.



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress 2013. 10 points on the NAEP scale is about one year's worth of learning.

## PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## DEFINITION

## Magnet Schools

Public schools with specialized courses or curriculum. They can have admissions requirements, but they must meet local, state & federal accountability standards.

## STATE POLICY

**48** states have magnet schools

## ENROLLMENT

About **4%** of all school-age children are in magnet schools.

Magnet  
Students



## IMPACT

Study results are somewhat mixed. Some show higher performance while others show similar results for magnet and non-magnet students.

## IMPACT



Several studies have shown higher graduation rates for magnet students, especially for those in Career Academies — career focused high school programs.

## PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## DEFINITION

## Charter Schools

Public schools with some autonomy in exchange for having to periodically renew their charter. Charter schools have open enrollment, cannot charge tuition, and must meet local, state & federal accountability standards.

## STATE POLICY

**41** states have  
charter  
schools

School boards authorize slightly more than half of all charters.

## ENROLLMENT

Charters serve about **4%** of all school-age children.

Charter  
Students





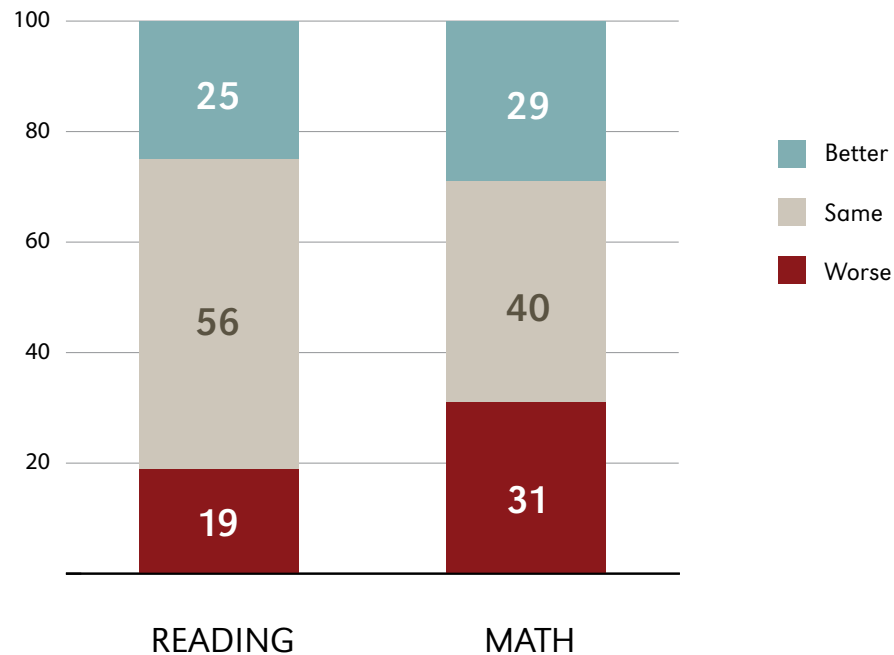
## PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## IMPACT

## Charter Schools

1 in 4 charter schools outperformed its traditional counterpart in reading.  
More than half performed about the same.

### Charter Schools Performance Compared To Traditional Public School Counterpart



Charter school elementary & middle school students do somewhat better on average than their peers. Not so in high school. The benefits seem to be greater for low-income students, ELLs and students of color.

Source: CREDO, 2013

## PRIVATE SCHOOLS

## DEFINITION

## Private Schools

Not free. Selective. Not open to every student.  
No public accountability for student performance.

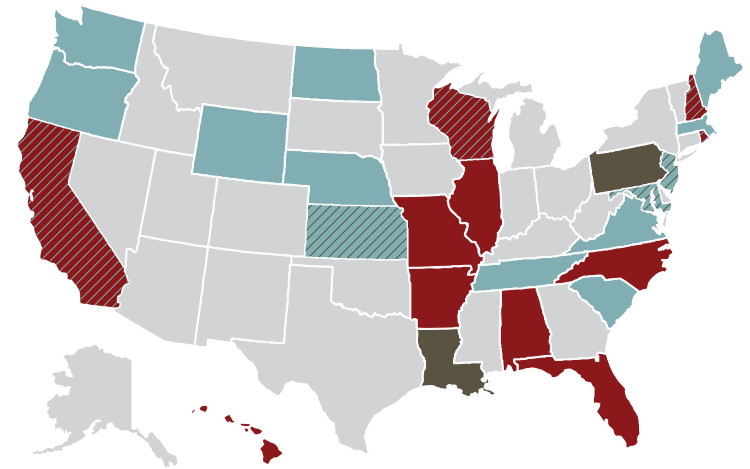
## ENROLLMENT

Enroll about **10%** of total school-aged population, which has been consistent for the last four decades.

Private School  
Students

## STATE POLICY

- States that require private schools to register with state Department of Education
- States that require registration for specific private schools
- States that allow private schools to be recognized by state Board of Education



Source: US Department of Education, 2009

## IMPACT

Private school students score somewhat higher on NAEP than their public school peers, but the gap has been narrowing.

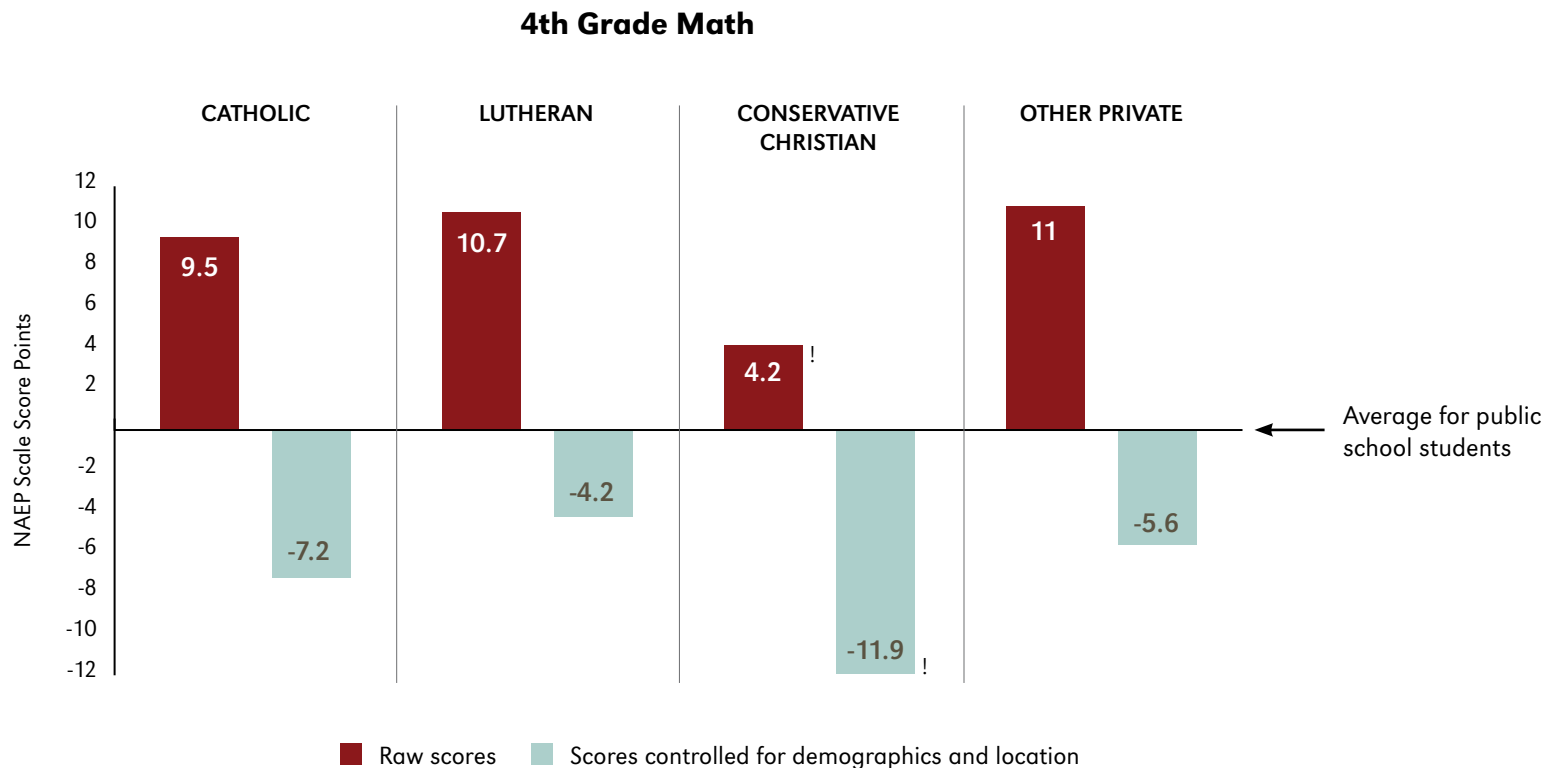
## PRIVATE SCHOOLS

## IMPACT

## Private Schools

## Public Versus Private School Performance

Private school students tend to outperform public school students on NAEP. But when researchers Lubienski & Lubienski controlled for student race, ethnicity & family income, they found the opposite – that in most cases, 4th and 8th grade public school students had the advantage in math scores over students in different kinds of private schools.



## PRIVATE SCHOOLS

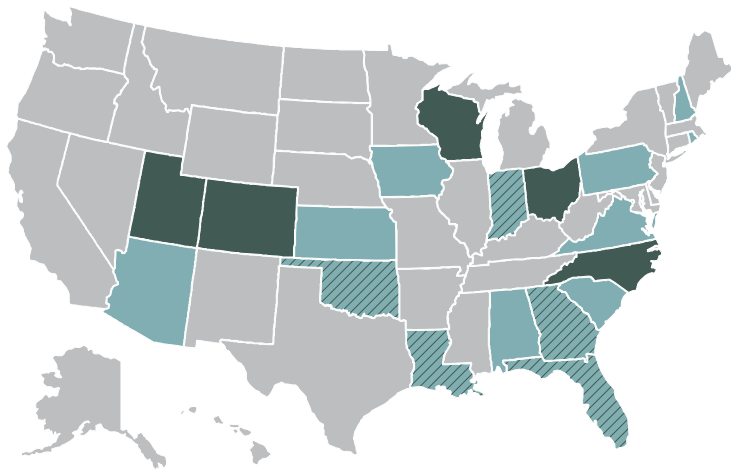
## DEFINITION

## Vouchers & Tuition Tax Credits

Taxpayer-funded scholarships that subsidize student tuition at private schools. Typically available to targeted groups, such as low-income students, those attending chronically low-performing schools, students with disabilities, or students in foster care.

## STATE POLICY

■ Offer vouchers ■ Offer tuition tax credits ■ Offers both



## ENROLLMENT

Voucher students comprise less than **½ of 1%** of all school-age children.



Voucher  
Students

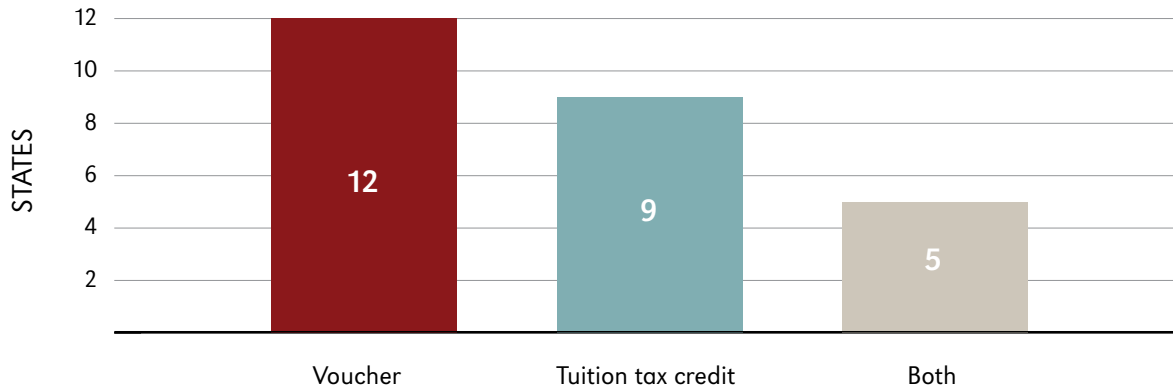


## PRIVATE SCHOOLS

## STATE POLICY

## Vouchers & Tuition Tax Credits

Across the country there are **38** voucher/tax credit programs in **21** states.



Accountability varies greatly by program; **20** require participating students to take standardized assessments while **18** have no accountability for student performance.

## IMPACT

Some studies report test score gains for low-income, African American students, but most show similar performance as public school students for other student groups.



Several studies have found voucher recipients are more likely to graduate from high school.

Generalizing findings is difficult because programs tend to be small and many students use vouchers for only a few years.

## HOMESCHOOLING

## DEFINITION

## Homeschooling

Students are taught at home by parents or tutors who determine content; virtual schooling can be a part of instruction.

## STATE POLICY

13

states & DC have requirements for homeschool instructors; some require certain subjects

23

states & DC require testing for homeschooled students

14

states define performance thresholds

## ENROLLMENT

Homeschoolers comprise **3%** of the total school-aged population.

Homeschool Students



## HOMESCHOOLING

IMPACT

## Homeschooling

**IMPACT UNKNOWN**

There is little reliable research on homeschooled students; consequently, little is known about them as a group.

Most studies are anecdotal or based on self-selected, self-reporting surveys.

Some small studies suggest higher SAT/ACT scores and college-going rates for home schooled students; how well these studies represent homeschoolers overall is unknown.

## VIRTUAL SCHOOLS

### DEFINITION

## Virtual Schools

Either public or private online schools. Can be either fully virtual or “blend” online & face to face instruction. Courses are purchased from private providers or developed by states and school districts.

### STATE POLICY

**30** states & DC  
operate virtual  
schools

### ENROLLMENT

Enrollments are growing but currently serve less than **1/2** of **1%** of total school-age population.

Virtual  
Students



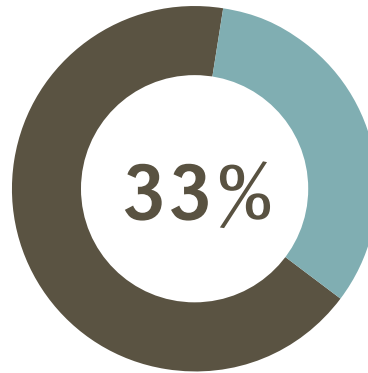


## VIRTUAL SCHOOLS

## IMPACT

## Virtual Schools

In 2012-13, only **33%** of virtual schools with state performance ratings were deemed academically acceptable.



Virtual charter schools in PA, MN & OH perform worse than their brick and mortar counterparts



On-time graduation rates for full-time virtual schools are about half the national average



Studies suggest that students taking AP or other high-level courses online do well



Credit recovery is the most common reason students take online courses, but the overall effect is hard to determine.

# Other Forms of School Choice

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- **Inter- and Intra-district transfers:** Over 20 states allow students to transfer within or between school districts to other public schools. The combination of inter- and intra-district transfers with magnet and charter school enrollments shows that about 16% of school-age children attend a public school of their choice.
- **Education Savings Accounts:** Education Savings Accounts (ESA) are similar to vouchers in that qualifying families receive a portion of state funds for educating their child. They differ in that the dollars are deposited in a privately managed account and can be used for tutoring, curriculum and other approved services as well as for private school tuition.

Arizona and Florida were the first states to initiate small-scale ESA programs for special needs students. Arizona also offers ESAs to students in low-performing schools. This spring, Nevada passed an ESA bill that represents the most far-reaching school choice program in the nation. Nevada will provide a large part of the state per-pupil allocation in the form of an ESA to students who are currently enrolled in Nevada public schools but wish to leave. Experts estimate that about 93% of all school-age children in the state would be eligible for an ESA. Nevada will begin distributing ESAs in January 2016.

# Take-aways

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- **There's no reason to conclude that choice in itself will produce better outcomes.** While many schools of choice do an exemplary job, the results aren't universally better than those produced by traditional public schools.
- **Non-public school choice should come with warning labels.** Policymakers who are considering supporting parents who wish to choose private schools or homeschooling should be aware that very little is known about the overall efficacy of schooling outside of public schools.
- **Expanding charter schools is not an overall reform strategy.** Most charter schools are no better than their traditional public school counterparts. Merely having more of them will not raise performance. Rather, policymakers and educators should focus on learning from successful charter schools about policies and practices that can help improve all schools.

# What Can School Boards Do?

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- Establish opportunities for sharing lessons learned between your traditional, magnet and charter schools. Learning from successes in your various programs can bolster the education provided all students in your district.
- Provide an adequate infrastructure for monitoring your students in virtual schools. Digital learning is the wave of the future and will have a central place in public education. But school boards need to make sure that it is done right so that students do not get lost in cyberspace.
- Establish policies for granting and revoking charters based on academic performance. Make sure these policies are well-known in order to attract stronger applications.

## A Disclosure

The Center for Public Education is an initiative of the National School Boards Association (NSBA). While we have sought to be as objective as possible in this report, readers should be aware that NSBA has official positions on school choice, as follows:

- **Public education choice:** NSBA supports “locally elected school boards in expanding public school choices to meet the needs of students in a rapidly changing world.” This support extends to charter schools as long as the local school board “retains sole authority” to grant and revoke charters.
- **Non-public education choice:** NSBA “recognizes and upholds the right of any group to establish and maintain schools so long as such schools are fully financed by their own supporters.” At the same time, NSBA believes public tax dollars should “only support public schools” and opposes “vouchers, tax credits, and tax subsidies for use at non-public K-12 schools.” NSBA further believes that “private and home schools should be subject to governmental regulation that assures a minimum standard of instruction under state law and adherence to the Constitution and laws of the United States.”

## Acknowledgments

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[www.centerforpubliceducation.org](http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org)

Founded in 1940, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) is a not-for-profit organization representing state associations of school boards and their more than 90,000 local school board members throughout the U.S. Working with and through our state associations, NSBA advocates for equity and excellence in public education through school board leadership. [www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org)

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