2026 ANNUAL REPORT

The State of School Choice in America

An even-handed, data-driven review of K-12 school choice — ESAs, vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, charters, magnets, homeschooling, the new federal program, the money, the evidence, and the debate.

K12 Academics — helping families Find Your Community! since 2004

1.5M
Students in private-choice programs

30+DC
States with a private-choice program

4M
Public charter-school students

2027
First national program launches

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

School choice went from the margins to the mainstream

In just a few years, K-12 school choice moved from small, targeted programs to a central feature of education policy. Roughly 1.5 million students now use private-choice programs, charters serve about four million, and in 2027 the first national program arrives through the federal tax code. This report maps the landscape, the money, and the evidence — presenting the case on all sides rather than taking one.

1.5M
Private-choice students

30+DC
States with a program

4M
Charter students

2027
National program launches

Biggest trends

- ESAs are now the fastest-growing design.
- Private-choice participation nearly doubled in three years.
- Charters grow even as district enrollment falls.
- A first national program arrives via the tax code in 2027.

Key findings

- ~1.5M students use private-choice programs across 30 states + DC.
- 19 states have a universal-eligibility program.
- ~4M students attend ~8,100 public charters.
- Parent satisfaction runs high; academic evidence is mixed.

Open questions

- Fiscal cost as universal programs scale.
- Switchers vs. already-private/home recipients.
- Academic outcomes & accountability.
- Legal challenges in several states.

What's at stake

- Wider access & customization for families.
- Competitive pressure & new models.
- Design choices shaping equity & oversight.
- The public-school role in a plural system.

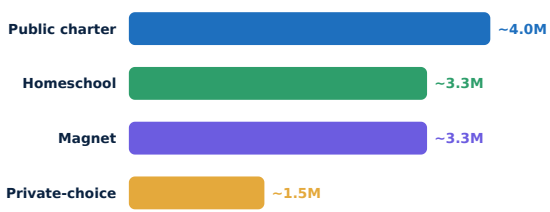
SECTION 01 — THE SCHOOL CHOICE LANDSCAPE

One label, many very different options

“School choice” spans a wide menu: public schools families choose into, charters and magnets, open enrollment, private schools (paid directly or via a program), homeschooling, and microschools. Each has its own funding, rules, and student count — together making American K-12 more plural than ever.

Where choice students are educated

Students by sector (approx., most recent)



The choice menu

Public & private options

Public — **charters, magnets & open enrollment** — choice inside the public system.

Private — **vouchers, ESAs & tax-credit scholarships** fund private options.

Home — **homeschooling & microschools** — the fastest-growing frontier.

Plural — most states now offer **several** at once.

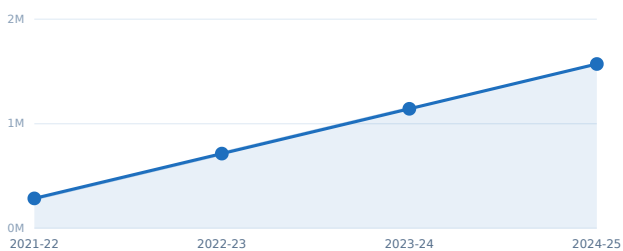
SECTION 02 — THE POLICY EXPLOSION

A few years that rewrote the map

The pace of change has been extraordinary. Starting in 2021-22, states began making programs universal — open to all or nearly all students — and private-choice participation has since nearly doubled. Waitlists, enrollment caps, and rising applications all signal strong demand.

Private-choice participation is climbing

Students in private-choice programs (millions)



How fast it moved

The universal wave

+25% — private-choice participation rose in a **single year**.

2× — participation **nearly doubled** in ~three years.

19 — states have a **universal-eligibility** program (or phasing in).

Demand — **waitlists & caps** signal more demand than funded seats.

Three mechanisms, one goal

Private-choice programs take a few forms. Vouchers send public funds to a private school; tax-credit scholarships route donations through nonprofits; and education savings accounts (ESAs) give families a flexible government-funded account for tuition, tutoring, therapies, and more. ESAs are now the most-used design.

How many states use each design

States with each program type



The mechanisms

What families receive

ESA — the #1 design — a **flexible account** for tuition, tutoring & therapies.

Voucher — **public funds to a private school**; Indiana's is the largest (~75k).

Tax-credit — donations to **scholarship organizations**, via the tax code.

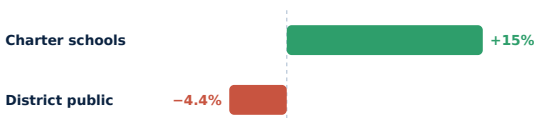
27M — students **eligible** for at least one program entering 2026.

The largest, and oldest, form of choice

Long before ESAs, families chose within the public system. Charters — tuition-free public schools with more autonomy — now enroll about four million students and keep growing even as district enrollment falls. Magnets and inter-district open enrollment add millions more seats of public choice.

Charters grow as districts shrink

Six-year enrollment change



Public choice at scale

Charters, magnets & open enrollment

~4M students in **~8,100 charter schools**; +15% over six years.

39/43 **state charter sectors** grew in the most recent year.

Magnet **~3.3M** in magnet & theme schools.

Open **open-enrollment** laws let families cross district lines.

The entrepreneurial edge of choice

Home-based and small-group learning surged during the pandemic and did not snap back. Roughly three million-plus students homeschool, and microschools — tiny, mixed-age communities averaging ~16 students — have become durable, though they are hard to count because many register as homeschoolers or private schools.

Home-based learning

Durable, not a fad

~3.3M students **homeschooling** — roughly 6% of school-age children.

16 the **average microschool** size; most serve ages 5-11.

Mix families increasingly **mix-and-match** settings.

Count microschoolers are **hard to tally** — often logged as homeschool/private.

Why families build their own

The microschool appeal

- **Small groups**
- **Mixed-age**
- **Customized pace**
- **Values alignment**
- **Flexibility**
- **ESA-funded (some states)**

ESAs increasingly **fund** these arrangements, turning a grassroots movement into a funded option.

A national program, delivered through the tax code

For the first time, school choice is going national. The Educational Choice for Children Act — enacted in 2025, effective 2027 — gives individuals a dollar-for-dollar federal tax credit (up to $1,700) for donations to scholarship-granting organizations. It is not a direct voucher; it works through the tax system, and states must opt in.

How the federal program works

ECCA, effective 2027

$1,700 — **dollar-for-dollar** federal tax credit for SGO donations.

2027 — first year taxpayers can **claim it**; states must opt in.

27 — states have **opted in or are on track** so far.

First — in **4 states** it will be the first private-choice program.

Why it matters

A structural shift

Because it runs through the **federal tax code** rather than state budgets, ECCA changes the mechanics and politics of choice — extending private options into states that had none.

Its ultimate reach depends on **how many states opt in** and how SGOs distribute scholarships.

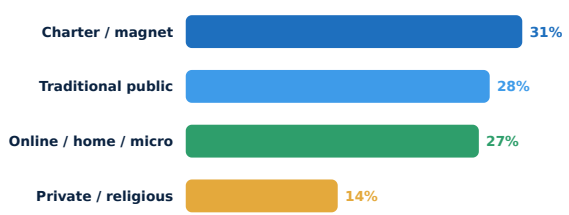
SECTION 07 — WHO CHOOSES, AND WHY

Families are shopping — and most start online

Interest in changing schools is high: in one national survey ~60% of parents considered a new school in a single year, though far fewer switched. Those who did split across every sector. Whatever the destination, families research options online first — where K12 Academics helps them compare schools and programs.

Where switching families went

Families who changed schools (2024)



What drives the choice

Motivations & research

60% of parents **considered** a new school; ~28% switched.

Fit **safety, academics, values & special needs** lead the reasons.

Search families start with **directories, reviews & school sites**.

K12A the **K12 Academics directory** is where families compare options.

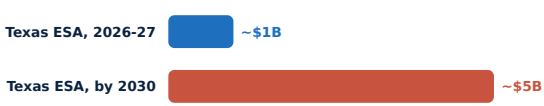
SECTION 08 — THE MONEY: COST & FISCAL IMPACT

Who pays, how much, and for whom

As programs go universal, cost becomes central. Universal ESAs can scale into the billions, and a recurring question is how many recipients switch from public schools versus families already in private or home settings — affecting both the fiscal math and the equity debate. These are among the most contested questions in the field.

Universal programs can scale fast

Projected state cost (Texas ESA)



The fiscal questions

Cost & who benefits

$5B projected **Texas ESA** cost by 2030 (from ~$1B at launch).

Half in Arizona, **~half of recipients** were already private/home.

Budget large programs raise **state budget** sustainability questions.

Design **income limits & caps** shape cost, equity & who benefits.

SECTION 09 — THE EVIDENCE

What research does — and doesn't — show

The research picture is genuinely mixed, and honest accounts say so. Parent satisfaction is consistently high. Academic-outcome findings vary: some early voucher studies found negative test-score effects, some later rebounded, urban charter studies often show gains, and recent state ESA evaluations show participants trailing public-school peers. Long-run attainment evidence is still thin.

What the studies find

A balanced read

>95% **parent satisfaction** in recent state ESA evaluations.

Mixed **test-score effects** vary by program, place & era.

Urban many **urban charter** studies show academic gains.

Below recent **ESA evaluations** (e.g., Tennessee) show participants trailing peers.

Reading the evidence honestly

Why claims conflict

Studies differ by **design, population, period & outcome measured** — so results rarely generalize cleanly.

Satisfaction and test scores can **diverge**: families value fit, safety & values that tests do not capture.

SECTION 10 — THE DEBATE

The strongest arguments on each side

School choice is genuinely contested. Below is a fair summary of the case each side makes — not an endorsement of either. Reasonable people weigh the same facts differently, and program design often matters more than the label.

Arguments in favor

The case supporters make

Fit — families — not ZIP codes — **match children to the right environment**.

Access — programs can **open private options** to lower-income families.

Compete — **competition** can push all schools to improve.

Satisfy — **high parent satisfaction** suggests real value.

Concerns raised

The case critics make

Cost — universal programs **strain state budgets** as they scale.

Switchers — much funding may go to **already-private/home** families.

Outcomes — **academic gains are uneven**; accountability varies.

Public — potential **impact on public-school** funding & enrollment.

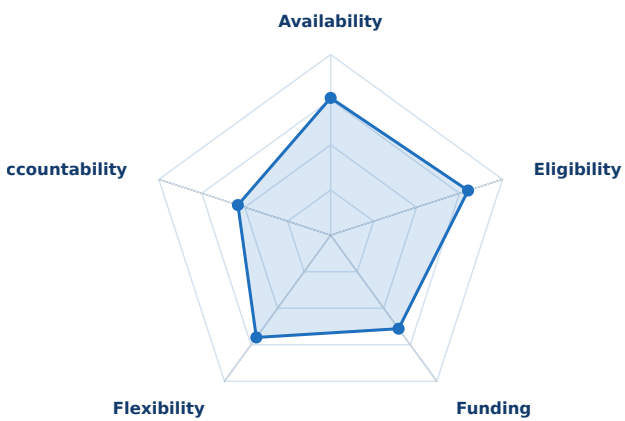
SECTION 11 — THE SCHOOL CHOICE ACCESS INDEX™

A K12 Academics framework for a state's choice ecosystem

Program counts alone don't tell families how usable choice really is. The Index profiles a state's choice environment across five weighted pillars — so families and policymakers can see not just whether programs exist, but how accessible, funded, flexible, and accountable they are.

Five-pillar profile

Illustrative — weights sum to 100



Program Availability 25%

How many options exist, public & private.

Eligibility & Access 20%

Who qualifies; universal vs. targeted.

Funding Adequacy 20%

Award size vs. real cost; caps & waitlists.

Flexibility 15%

Allowed uses & mix-and-match learning.

Accountability 20%

Transparency, oversight & outcome reporting.

SECTION 12 — THE FUTURE OF SCHOOL CHOICE (2030 OUTLOOK)

Two forces, and a to-do list

Toward 2030, choice gets broader (the federal program, more universal states), more flexible (ESAs, microschools, mix-and-match), and more scrutinized (cost, outcomes, accountability). How states design programs — eligibility, funding, oversight — will matter more than whether they adopt them.

↗ Expanding forces

The federal program extending choice into new states.

ESAs & microschools enabling mix-and-match learning.

Strong demand — waitlists, caps & rising applications.

Bipartisan interest in some public-choice options.

! Constraining forces

Fiscal limits as universal programs scale.

Accountability & outcome questions.

Legal challenges in several states.

Supply — enough quality seats where families are.

For policymakers

- Design for access & accountability
- Plan for fiscal sustainability
- Measure & publish outcomes

For families

- Know the options in your state
- Check eligibility, caps & deadlines
- Evaluate fit, not just labels

For schools & providers

- Be discoverable where families search
- Communicate outcomes clearly
- Meet transparency expectations

DATA & METHODOLOGY

Methodology & sources

This report synthesizes the most recent publicly available data from national research and tracking organizations, current as of publication in 2026 — presented even-handedly rather than to advocate.

Data sources

- EdChoice — ABCs of School Choice & participation data
- Nat'l Alliance for Public Charter Schools — enrollment
- Ballotpedia & Education Week — program & policy tracking
- State ESA evaluations (e.g., Tennessee OREA)
- Harvard PEPG & academic studies — research evidence
- Nat'l School Choice Awareness Foundation — parent behavior
- K12 Academics directory analytics

Presented even-handedly rather than to advocate. Figures reflect the most recent data available at publication in 2026; program & homeschool data lag and vary by source; sector counts are approximate; percentages rounded.

Contact K12 Academics

Questions about this report, or about listing your school or program? We'd love to hear from you.

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