

Statement before the United States Congress House Committee on  
Education and the Workforce  
"Expanding Educational Opportunity Through School Choice"

## School Choice in America: What Does Research Tell Us?

Gerard Robinson  
Resident Fellow, American Enterprise Institute

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*The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent those of the American Enterprise Institute.*

Good morning, Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished members of the Committee. It is an honor to be here to share with you what the research says about school choice.

My name is Gerard Robinson and I am a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a non-profit, non-partisan public policy research organization based here in Washington, D.C. My comments today are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of AEI. I have worked in education since 1991, and have seen the effects of school choice policies and programs on families and children through the lens of an advocate, president of a nonprofit organization, state education executive in Virginia and Florida, and a researcher.

School choice is more than a sound bite—it is a social movement. Between 1990 and 2015, lawmakers in over 40 states and the District of Columbia have enacted a range of school choice laws. The rationale for doing so spans from empowering teachers to create innovative classrooms to expanding opportunities for parents. Polling data from a Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup Poll and *Education Next* indicate that the American public supports school choice.<sup>1</sup> So do leaders in corporate, philanthropic and faith-based communities. Why? Because school choice programs advance opportunity.

In this testimony I will focus on four school choice programs: charter schools, vouchers, tax credits, and education savings accounts (ESAs). It is worth noting early in my testimony the popular misconception about school choice—that it only benefits children from wealthy households or is used solely by white and Asian families. In reality, affluent families are more able to move to the district of their choice, giving them a method by which to choose their school in the absence of school choice policies. One of the great accomplishments of the school choice movement, then, is that it has been able to serve students from all races and backgrounds that might not otherwise have the ability to choose their school. While research has shown that many subgroups of students benefit from school choice policies, students in urban settings have been found to benefit the most.

## **Charter Schools**

The fastest growing public sector choice program in the U.S. is charter schools. What began in Minnesota in 1991 as an experiment to empower teachers has grown to 2.9 million students in 43 states attending 6,723 charter schools in 2015. Approximately 55% of charter schools have been operating for 7 years or more, and over half of all charter schools are located in cities. In fact, a report published by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools in 2015 identified 10 districts with the largest percentage of charter school students, and 10 districts with the fastest enrollment growth—most of these districts are located in states represented on this committee.<sup>2</sup> With 1 million students on charter school waiting lists today, states must create innovative ways to meet demand. In the interim, taxpayers have one question about charter schools: do they improve student outcomes? The answer is yes.

According to a 2015 report published by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, charter school students outperform their traditional public school peers in math and reading.<sup>3</sup> This national study is important because it provides a careful and comprehensive analysis of the effects charter schools have on urban school students. For instance, the report examined achievement results for students enrolled in charters and traditional public schools between 2006-2007 and 2011-2012 that were located in 41 urban areas in 22 states. CREDO researchers concluded that charter school students gained 40 additional “days of learning” when compared to their public school peers. Black students gained the most from their enrollment in charter schools compared to their peers in charters as well as their peers in public schools: on average, they received an additional 36 days of learning in math and 26 days in reading compared to their non-charter peers. Hispanic students gained days of learning in math and reading as well, while Asian students gained days of learning in math only. While charter schools have produced great results, there is still room for improvement. For example, the CREDO report identified that Native American students in traditional public schools significantly outperformed their charter school peers in math, and white students in traditional public schools significantly outperformed their charter peers in reading and math.

Choice programs in the private school sector are growing as well. In 2015, the U.S. had 48 publically funded private school choice programs educating more than 400,000 students in 23 states and the District of Columbia. The nation’s first city-based publicly funded private choice plan is the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP).

### **Scholarships (i.e., Vouchers)**

Founded in 1990, MPCP provides a scholarship (i.e., voucher) to low-income parents to pay for an education at a private school of their choice. Today, MPCP awards scholarships to 27,619 students.<sup>4</sup> In 2014-2015, the U.S. had approximately 140,000 students using a publically funded voucher to attend school. Some of these scholarship programs operate exclusively in cities, including Cleveland and the District of Columbia. Other programs are statewide, operating in Indiana and Louisiana. Again, the public and policymakers often ask: do these programs work? Research says they do, with a few caveats.

The majority of the 13 “gold standard” experimental evaluations of the impact of private school choice programs on student test scores found statistically significant benefits on academic outcomes for participating students. In particular, 6 show positive outcomes for all participating groups, 4 show positive effects on black students, 2 show no effects, and 1 shows negative effects. In 2012, Dr. Patrick Wolf, University of Arkansas professor and the key principal investigator of MPCP and the District of Columbia Scholarship Program (OPS), did a summary of longitudinal evaluations of MPCP. His review found that voucher students had higher high school graduation and college enrollment rates as compared to their peers in traditional public schools.<sup>5</sup>

Similar findings exist for OSP. Results from an evaluation of achievement data of students who received a scholarship offer and those who did not receive an offer four years later are as follow: (1) reading and math scores for students who were offered (or used) a scholarship were similar to students who did not receive a scholarship; (2) 82% of students who were offered a scholarship graduated from high school compared to 70% of students who were not offered a scholarship; and (3) parents' overall satisfaction with the school was positive.<sup>6</sup>

It is worth noting that the majority of the students enrolled in the Milwaukee and the District of Columbia scholarship programs are from low-income and working-class households, and are members of diverse ethnic and linguistic groups. As I mentioned earlier, there is a popular misconception that scholarships (or charter schools) benefit children from wealthy families at the expense of others. The research proves the opposite is the case.

Yet, while several voucher programs across the country have shown promising results for students, there are also some exceptions. In a 2015 National Bureau of Economic Research report, the Louisiana Scholarship Program was found to have negative effects on students' learning outcomes in science, reading, and social studies.<sup>7</sup> Further research is needed to uncover why these findings deviate from other findings on voucher programs, but the Louisiana story reminds us that several other factors—including how choice programs are designed and implemented—matter a great deal for a program's ability to create positive outcomes for students.

## **Tax Credits**

The fastest growing private school choice program is tax credits. Begun in Arizona in 1997, tax credit programs were educating approximately 200,000 students in 2015. Do they work? Florida has the largest tax credit program in the nation with 78,142 students. Pursuant to Florida law, the state department of education must hire an expert to annually evaluate the tax credit program. Dr. David Figlio, Professor of Education and Social Policy and Economics at Northwestern University, has been a director of the evaluation project for several years. According to an evaluation of the program published by Dr. Figlio in 2014, participating students “come from less advantaged families than other students receiving free or reduced-price lunches”; tend to be among the lower performing students in an already low-performing public school; and many are Black and Hispanic. After reviewing their results on nationally normed tests (i.e., Stanford Achievement Test, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, and TerraNova), Dr. Figlio concluded that tax credit students gained one year's worth of learning in one year's time.<sup>8</sup> This is an important achievement. Why?

According to a 2010 study by Drs. Figlio, Cassandra M.D. Hart and Molly Metzger, Florida's tax credit scholarship students on average come from low-performing public schools, and often have lower test scores than their peers who did not apply for a scholarship.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, one year's worth of growth is a meaningful step in the right direction. A 2013 study by James Kelly and Dr. Ben Scafidi identified reasons other than

test scores for why parents in Georgia chose to participate in a tax credit program. Reasons included more individualized attention, values of the school, class size, and student safety.<sup>10</sup>

### **Education Savings Accounts**

Education Savings Accounts (ESA) are the latest addition to the private school choice movement. Since the first ESA law was enacted in Arizona in 2011, four other states have enacted ESA policies: Florida, Mississippi, Nevada and Tennessee.<sup>11</sup> Approximately 6,772 students have an ESA in Arizona, Florida, and Mississippi combined, and other states are currently considering ESA legislation.

### **The Role of Congress**

I believe state legislatures will enact more school choice laws in 2016. Is there a role for this committee to play in supporting school choice at the state level? Yes. Here are a few suggestions.

1. Encourage states to take full advantage of the option provided in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to voluntarily use public funds to experiment with innovative education models.
2. Allow states to make Title I portable. Congress removed this option from an earlier version of ESSA. One way to find middle ground on this issue is to put the decision in the hands of states.
3. Allow states to make IDEA funds portable as part of a statewide voucher.
4. Continue to fund charter schools, which the committee supported in ESSA.
5. Direct the General Accounting Office, Congressional Budget Office, or another entity to evaluate how federal rules for state funding may prohibit states such as Nevada from folding Title I or IDEA funds into existing ESA policies.
6. Redesign 529 accounts to give parents access to these funds earlier in their child's education.

In closing, I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony before this committee. I believe school choice is one of the most important social movements of the last 25 years. School choice is changing the academic and economic trajectory for millions of children and families. I am pleased with the committee's focus on this topic. I look forward to your questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Henderson, Michael B., Paul E. Peterson, and Martin R. West. "The 2015 EdNext Poll on School Reform." *Education Next* 16, no. 1 (2016). [http://educationnext.org/files/ednext\\_XVI\\_1\\_2015poll.pdf](http://educationnext.org/files/ednext_XVI_1_2015poll.pdf); "The 47<sup>th</sup> Annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools." *PDK/Gallup* (2015). [http://pdkpoll2015.pdkintl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/pdkpoll47\\_2015.pdf](http://pdkpoll2015.pdkintl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/pdkpoll47_2015.pdf); and The Center for Education Reform. *2015 Progress Report: Where We've Been*. Washington, DC. 2015. <http://issuu.com/centerforedreform/docs/cer-2015-progressreport?e=3864535/31897424>.

<sup>2</sup> National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. *A Growing Movement: America's Largest Charter School Communities*. Washington, DC. (2015). [http://www.publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/enrollmentsshare\\_web.pdf](http://www.publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/enrollmentsshare_web.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Center for Research on Education Outcomes. *Urban Charter School Study Report on 41 Regions*. Stanford, CA. (2015). <http://urbancharters.stanford.edu/overview.php>.

<sup>4</sup> Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. "MPCP Facts and Figures for 2015-2016." <http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sms/pdf/MPCP%20Sept%20Facts%20and%20Figures%202015-16.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> For Dr. Wolf's research about MPCP, see University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform. "Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) Evaluation." <http://www.uaedreform.org/milwaukee-parental-choice-program-evaluation/>; and Wolf, Patrick J., "The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Final Report, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation, Report #36," *The University of Arkansas Department of Education*, (February 2012). For background information on early gold standard studies about private school choice, see Forster, Greg. "A win-win solution: The empirical evidence on school choice." *Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice* (2013). <http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/2013-4-A-Win-Win-Solution-WEB.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Wolf, Patrick J., Babette Gutmann, Michael Puma, Brian Kisida, Lou Rizzo, Nada Eissa, and Matthew Carr. "Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report. NCEE 2010-4018." *National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance* (2010). For other studies about OPS, see Wolf, Patrick J., Brian Kisida, Babette Gutmann, Michael Puma, Nada Eissa, and Lou Rizzo, "School Vouchers and Student Outcomes: Experimental Evidence from Washington, D.C.," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 32, no. 2 (2013): 246–270; and Wolf, Patrick J. and Michael McShane, "Is the Juice Worth the Squeeze? A Benefit/Cost Analysis of the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarships Program," *Association for Education Finance and Policy* 8, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 74-99.

<sup>7</sup> Abdulkadiroglu, Atila, Parag A. Pathak, and Christopher R. Walters. *School Vouchers and Student Achievement: First-Year Evidence from the Louisiana Scholarship Program*.

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Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research (2015).  
<http://www.nber.org/papers/w21839>.

<sup>8</sup> Figlio, David N. *Evaluation of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program Participation, Compliance and Test Scores in 2012-13*. Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research (2014). [https://www.stepupforstudents.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ftc\\_research\\_2012-13\\_report.pdf](https://www.stepupforstudents.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ftc_research_2012-13_report.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Figlio, David, Cassandra M.D. Hart, and Molly Metzger. "Who uses a means-tested scholarship, and what do they choose?" *Economics of Education Review* 29, no. 2 (2010): 301-317.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly, James P., and Ben Scafidi. *More Than Scores: An Analysis of Why and How Parents Choose Private Schools*. Indianapolis: Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice (2013). <https://www.heartland.org/sites/default/files/more-than-scores.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> American Federation for Children. "Types of Educational Choice." <http://www.federationforchildren.org/ed-choice-101/types-educational-choice/>.