

Education Choice Policy Resources

Updated July 21, 2025

Related Topic: [Education](#)

Education choice, or school choice, refers to a wide range of policies that allow families to choose the school their child attends outside of their assigned neighborhood school. Within the education choice landscape, there are policies supporting both public school choice and private school choice.

Public school choice refers to policies that enable families to enroll their students in public schools other than their assigned traditional public school, while private school choice refers to policies that provide financial support for families to enroll their students in nonpublic schools. Common public school choice policies include charter schools and open enrollment. Common private school choice policies include vouchers, tax credit scholarships and education savings accounts (ESAs).

This resource defines the various types of school choice and other relevant education choice terms. Please note that while these terms are used to define the education choice concept and distinguish between program types, states often use such terms interchangeably in naming their programs. Additionally, state policy landscape scans for many of the common choice provisions are linked below, along with other NCSL education choice resources.

Types of Education Choice

Charter Schools

Publicly funded and independently managed schools of choice that have greater autonomy in operations compared to traditional public schools, which is provided through exemptions from certain state requirements. This additional autonomy is granted in exchange for increased accountability.

Education Savings Accounts (ESAs)

An education choice policy that routes state education funding into authorized savings accounts for families to use to cover the costs of their students' approved educational expenses, such as private school tuition, tutoring, educational testing costs, instructional materials, educational technology, transportation and out-of-school time activities. Subject to student and expense eligibility criteria, expenses may also include specialized services and therapies for students with disabilities and expenses for homeschooling.

Homeschools

Education where families teach their children at home.

Learning Pods

Small groups of students who are taught together, often under the guidance of a tutor or teacher. This instruction may be conducted in tandem with homeschool or traditional public school instruction.

Magnet Schools	Public schools of choice with specialized curricula or themes, such as STEM, fine arts, performing arts, international studies and world languages, designed to attract students from across a school district or geographic region.
Microschools	Small, community-based schools with a limited number of students that emphasize personalized and often innovative learning approaches. Microschools can be established within public or private schools or as their own separate schools.
Open Enrollment	A form of school choice that permits students to attend a public school they are not assigned to geographically. Open enrollment can permit students to attend a different public school within their assigned district, called intra-district or within-district open enrollment, or to attend a school outside of their district, known as inter-district or cross-district open enrollment.
Tax-Credit Education Savings Accounts	A type of ESA policy that provides tax credits to individuals or businesses donating to scholarship-granting organizations (defined below), which then route the donated funds into authorized savings accounts for families to use to cover the costs of their students' approved educational expenses. Approved educational expenses can include items such as private school tuition, tutoring, educational testing costs, instructional materials, educational technology, transportation and out-of-school time activities. Subject to student and expense eligibility criteria, expenses may also include specialized services and therapies for students with disabilities and expenses for homeschooling.
Tax-Credit Scholarships	Programs that provide tax credits to individuals or businesses donating to scholarship-granting organizations (defined below), which then use the donated funds to award scholarships for students to attend private schools. Additionally, funds may be used for certain expenses associated with attending private school, such as required textbooks, curricular materials, uniforms and lab or course fees. Subject to student and expense eligibility criteria, expenses may also include specialized services and therapies for students with disabilities.
Tax Credits and Deductions	A form of education choice that provides families with income tax relief through credits or deductions for approved educational expenses. Approved educational expenses may be limited to tuition and related fees or cover these costs among a wider range of expenses such as tutoring, educational testing costs and transportation. Subject to student and expense eligibility criteria, expenses may also include specialized services and therapies for students with disabilities and expenses for homeschooling.
Town Tuitioning Programs	Education choice programs that allow students in districts without public schools at certain grade levels to attend nearby public or private schools, with tuition paid directly by the district. Only Maine , New Hampshire and Vermont have such programs.

Vouchers

A form of education choice in which state education funding is provided to families in the form of scholarships to use to pay for private school tuition. Scholarships may cover all or part of the cost of tuition. Additionally, funds may be used for certain expenses associated with attending private school, such as required textbooks, curricular materials, uniforms and lab or course fees. Subject to student eligibility criteria, expenses may also include specialized services and therapies for students with disabilities.

Other Relevant Terms

Private School Choice

Policies, such as education savings accounts and vouchers, that enable families to use public or private funds to enroll their students in nonpublic schools. Some of these policies, such as ESAs, tax-credit ESAs and tax credits and deductions, may also allow for use of funds to cover expenses related to public school attendance or homeschooling.

	Voucher	Tax credit scholarship	ESA	Tax credit ESA	Tax credits and deductions
<i>What it covers</i>	Tuition*	Tuition*	Approved educational expenses	Approved educational expenses	Approved educational expenses
<i>How it works</i>	Public education funds -> scholarship	Tax credit-eligible contributions to SGOs -> scholarship	Public education funds -> authorized account	Tax credit-eligible contributions to SGOs -> authorized account	Tax claims -> credits and deductions for expenses

*Vouchers and tax-credit scholarships may also cover a limited number of expenses in addition to tuition that are directly associated with private school attendance, such as uniforms or required textbooks.

Public School Choice

Policies that enable families to enroll their students in public schools other than their assigned neighborhood public school, including charter schools and magnet schools.

Scholarship-Granting Organizations (SGOs)

Nonprofit entities that raise and distribute funds to provide scholarships, often for private school tuition or educational expenses related to tax-credit scholarships or tax-credit education savings accounts.

State Policy Scans of Education Choice Policies

This series provides a high-level overview of education choice policies, including key definitions and state program information.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are publicly funded and independently managed schools of choice.

Education Savings Accounts

Education savings account (ESA) programs route state education funding into authorized accounts which families can use to pay for an eligible student's approved educational expenses.

Open Enrollment

Open enrollment is a type of public education choice which permits students to attend a public school that they are not assigned to geographically.

Tax Credits and Deductions

Tax credits and deductions provide families with income tax relief through credits or deductions for approved educational expenses.

Tax-Credit Education Savings Accounts

Tax-credit education savings account programs are education savings accounts (ESAs) that are funded through a different mechanism than standard ESA programs.

Tax-Credit Scholarships

Tax-credit scholarship programs provide tax credits to individuals and businesses when they donate to scholarship-granting organizations (SGOs) which award scholarships for families to use toward paying for an eligible student's nonpublic school tuition and certain related expenses.

Vouchers

Voucher programs provide state education funding to families for use toward paying for their eligible students' nonpublic school tuition and certain related expenses.

Additional Resources on Education Choice



Open Enrollment: State Policy Trends

NCSL Brief



State Actions on Education Savings Accounts

NCSL Brief



Education Trends in States | Part 3: Education Choice and School Finance

NCSL Legislative Video Resource Center



Microschools 101: Basics of a New Approach to School at Home

NCSL Legislative Video Resource Center



Pre-K-12 Education Legislation Database

NCSL Database