



# AFPI LEADS THE CHARGE IN MOST HISTORIC YEAR FOR SCHOOL CHOICE PROGRESS

At the America First Policy Institute (AFPI), we believe that the transformative progress on school choice will help prepare Americans for the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. This year, more states have passed school choice legislation than any other time in history. As support for school choice grows, students across the Nation are reaping the benefits of better educational outcomes and more individualized schooling. Most importantly, parents feel empowered to have a stronger voice in the conversation about their child's education. Since day one, AFPI has been fighting for educational freedom. As of April 2023, 137 bills in 42 states have been introduced in state legislatures to advance school choice, and more states are likely to follow with actions that will enable parents to send their children to the schools that best suit their children's educational needs.

AFPI recognizes that our Nation still has much work to do to provide educational freedom for all children, but we are optimistic about the path forward. The Center for Education Opportunity (CEO) at AFPI works tirelessly to share the most comprehensive research regarding the expansion of educational freedom. It also explains the importance of school choice in our country right now and how AFPI will continue working to make even more progress.

Federal law does not establish a national right to education. However, every state constitution provides some form of public education at the elementary and secondary levels for students. Therefore, state-level action is necessary to improve education.

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A given family's residence and income level should not dictate the quality of education children have access to. State and local leadership, along with policymakers, public and private organizations, and schools, are responsible for the improvement of educational opportunities in their states, but most importantly, parents should be in control of the decision-making process for their children. With commitment and collaboration, the U.S. can provide high-quality education, ensure taxpayer dollars make a direct impact, and create a lasting effect for the next generation of Americans.

More than ever before, this year, state leaders were able to reform the education system and reignite excellence. Through experience, research, and education, AFPI's Center for Education Opportunity dedicates itself to fostering transformational action so that every child can achieve the American Dream.

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### Taking Note of Troubling Test Scores

National test results for 2022 show that school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating effect on American schoolchildren. Eighth-grade math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, often called the “Nation’s Report Card,” fell by eight points since the test was last administered in 2019. Similarly, fourth-grade scores dropped by five points.

### Educating the American People about School Choice

Beginning in early 2022, AFPI and America First Works (AFW), the advocacy organization of AFPI, were intimately involved in laying the foundation to expand school choice in the states. In January 2022, AFPI hosted a School Choice Speaker Series event in Washington, D.C., to celebrate National School Choice Week. Scott Turner, Chair of the Center for Education Opportunity at AFPI, was

joined by Kellyanne Conway, Chair of the Center for the American Child at AFPI, and Brooke Rollins, President and CEO of AFPI. Together, they discussed the importance of expanding school choice now and empowering parents. More than 100 school choice advocates attended the event, and more than 20 media outlets covered the discussion.

AFPI has produced more than 20 research reports and five national opinion articles and has participated in more than 10 national media events. AFPI has drafted school choice model legislation that was used in several key states, including Arkansas, Iowa, Arizona, Oklahoma, and Florida. AFPI has published several state specific documents to help provide support during the legislative process. These include op-eds, expert testimony, a “Myths vs. Facts on School Choice” fact sheet, and data and research, which were provided to state leaders. AFW then shared this data and other information with many legislators, including ones in rural districts.





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## Leadership Matters in the States

### ARKANSAS:

On March 8th, Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders signed the comprehensive Arkansas L.E.A.R.N.S. bill into law. The bill ensures that Arkansas parents will have the right to choose which type of education—private, parochial, or charter—is best suited to their children. It prioritizes access to effective teachers, the increase of record-low test scores, and the use of federal/state funds to expand quality childhood education.

This Education Savings Account (ESA) program was a result of the Center for Education Opportunity (CEO) working directly with the Governor’s team. AFPI worked fervently to provide model policy, research on student outcomes, fact sheets, and key expert testimony.

“Every American student deserves the opportunity to receive a quality education. Governor Sanders’ plan will empower parents to pick the best school for their children and reward the best teachers for their work in the classroom,” said Brooke Rollins, President and CEO of AFPI.

In addition to benefiting parents and students, the bill also prioritizes teachers by mandating a minimum salary of \$50,000 and repealing the outdated Teacher Fair Dismissal and the School Employees Fair Hearing Acts. Raising salaries and increasing retention will incentivize teachers to put their best foot forward and commit to districts. This type of action is needed to continue combatting teacher attrition in America.

### ARIZONA:

Arizona has seen great progress on school choice, with Gov. Doug Ducey signing H.B. 2853, the first ever universal school choice bill in the U.S., in 2022. The bill ensures that any child in Arizona can opt

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—Brooke L. Rollins

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out of public school and join the education savings account (ESA) program. Parents will be happy to know that they can access up to \$6,500 to spend on private schools, charter schools, or homeschooling. H.B. 2853 also enables families to put leftover funds towards necessary school supplies and electronics.

AFPI has been working to educate the American citizens about the importance of the school choice initiatives since day one and has played an integral role in educating the American people about the benefits of Empowerment Scholarship Accounts. Despite Governor Katie Hobbs threatening to defund the program, there is widespread support from the public—much of which is bipartisan. AFW continues to amplify messaging around this issue, produce op-eds, and distribute press releases. Now is the time for Arizona to push forward with school choice, not backwards.





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**FLORIDA:**

In March 2023, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed a bill that will expand school choice vouchers to all students in the state. H.B. 1 expands eligibility so that a student's parent may request and receive a scholarship to enroll in a private school of their choice. Florida now joins Arkansas, Iowa, Arizona, West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Utah as states with universal Education Savings Account-style programs, which means all students in the state can access the program. In less than two years, the number of states passing universal ESA programs has increased from zero to seven—and counting.

**UTAH:**

Utah families will be pleased to know that the state legislature passed H.B. 215, a bill that empowers parents by allowing them to choose the best school for their children, in January of 2023. It establishes the Utah Fits All Scholarship Program, an education savings account (ESA program), and increases teacher salaries by \$6,000. It also provides \$8,000 per student to be used for tuition and other educational expenses. Not only will it benefit between 5,000-7,000 students during its first year, but it will also incentivize teachers to put their best foot forward. As Scott Turner often says, “No one knows the needs and interests of a child more than their parent or guardian.”

**TEXAS:**

20 school choice-related bills were introduced during the 2023 legislative session. The Texas Senate passed a bill that aims to prohibit infringement on parental rights by creating ESAs worth \$8,000 for all Texas K-12 students. This bill, S.B. 8, encourages an admissions lottery system that rightfully prioritizes special education students, students in foster care, and children of military personnel. This bill is crucial to

ensure that each Texas student has a bright educational future that is tailored to his or her personal needs and preferences.

S.B. 8 also aims to prevent implementation of gender/sexuality curriculum, which has been shown to harm and confuse young students. AFPI is committed to educating the American people about the importance of holding teachers and school boards accountable to ensure that students receive a traditional, beneficial education.

AFPI's work was crucial to educating Texas policy makers about the need for the reforms. Director, Dr. Laurie Todd-Smith, Ph.D., provided expert testimony to the Texas Senate and House Education Committees regarding the benefits of S.B. 8 in expanding school choice. Additionally, AFPI supported Parent Power events highlighting the positive outcomes of school choice in rural areas.

**IOWA:**

As the Iowa legislative session began, AFPI doubled its effort to ensure a victory for school choice in Iowa. Kellyanne Conway, Chair of the Center for the American Child at AFPI, went on Jeff Angelo's “Need to Know” radio talk show in the Des Moines media market, where legislators were convening to make a case for school choice. On Tuesday, January 24, Governor Reynolds signed the Students First Act into law. Iowa's legislation is even more expansive than Arizona's bill and is one of the most robust and comprehensive school choice bills in the Nation. The legislation allows parents of children K-12 to receive funding for school-related needs such as private tuition, scholarships worth \$7,598 per student in the first year, and school supplies or a tutor.



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**Additional School Choice Policies:**

- ★ Currently, **32 states** or territories (including Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C.) offer some school choice programs.

*Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, District of Columbia, West Virginia.*

- ★ **8 states** have now passed universal school choice.
- ★ **11 states** have ESA policies (only six are universal ESA programs).
- ★ **15 states** and Washington, D.C., offer voucher programs. Five of these programs are for only special needs students.
- ★ The majority of states and Washington, D.C., allow charters. Approximately 7.5% of all public school students attend charters.
- ★ Kellyanne Conway and Ashley Hayek, Chief Engagement Officer at AFPI, have done radio interviews supporting education freedom in Missouri, and AFPI will continue ongoing efforts this legislative cycle in Ohio, Missouri, and the Carolinas.

**Additional Publications**

- ★ [Parent Power: The Movement this Nation Needs \(townhall.com\)The Educational Choice for Children Act](#)
- ★ [The Education Savings Account Act](#)
- ★ [Universal Parental School Choice Act](#)
- ★ [Myths Vs. Facts School Choice In Iowa](#)
- ★ [America's Pro-Work Pro-Family Consensus is Under Attack](#)
- ★ [The Center for Education Opportunity Overview](#)
- ★ [School Choice Empowers Families and Creates Greater Student Outcomes](#)

