



FACT SHEET | Center for Education Opportunity

MYTHS VS. FACTS: SCHOOL

CHOICE IN TENNESSEE

Laurie Todd-Smith, Ph.D. | March 19, 2024

DEBUNKING MYTHS: SCHOOL CHOICE EXPANSION IN TENNESSEE

Myth: Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) are entitlement programs.

Fact: ESAs are not government assistance. They are government-authorized savings accounts controlled by parents for the purpose of investing in their children's education.

The accounts allow parents to withdraw their children from public schools and receive a deposit of funds into government-authorized savings accounts with restricted but multiple uses. These accounts can be used to cover educational expenses, such as private school tuition, online learning programs, private tutoring, or other approved education-related expenses.

Myth: Money comes with strings attached. School choice would require student beneficiaries to take government-mandated tests aligned with Common Core.

Fact: School choice programs like ESAs do not require students to take government-mandated tests aligned with Common Core. While some states may have specific testing or curriculum standards requirements, this is not a universal aspect of all school choice programs.

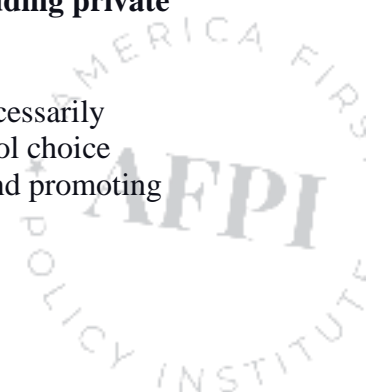
In Florida, for example, the Family Empowerment Scholarship Program does not mandate that students take government-mandated tests aligned with Common Core. Instead, the program allows families to choose the best educational options for their children, including private schools, which may have their own standards and assessments.

In summary, while some school choice programs may have specific testing or curriculum requirements, this is not a universal feature of all school choice initiatives.

Myth: School choice aid is distributed to non-profits with political agendas.

Fact: School choice programs are designed to empower families to make the best educational choices for their children. The funds are typically distributed to families through scholarships, which can be used at various academic institutions, including private schools, charter schools, and homeschooling programs.

The involvement of non-profit organizations in distributing these funds does not necessarily mean that the funds are being directed to political causes. Many non-profits in school choice programs focus on providing educational opportunities to disadvantaged students and promoting a quality education.



In summary, the idea that school choice aid is distributed to non-profits with political agendas is a myth not supported by the facts. School choice programs are designed to empower families and promote educational equality, not to advance any political agenda.

Myth: School choice funding wholly depends on the state budget, and Tennessee already spends too much on education.

Fact: The Education Freedom Scholarships program allocates the amount equal to the state and local Basic Education Program (BEP) per-pupil amount of a student's home district or the statewide average BEP (\$8,192), whichever amount is less. Families may pay more than the maximum ESA amount for tuition and educational services.

Funds are deposited into families' ESAs at least four times per school year to help parents pay for private school tuition and fees. Funds may also be used for textbooks, state-approved tutoring and therapy services, transportation to educational institutions or services, computer hardware and software, school uniforms, summer education programs, and higher education expenses. A minimum of 20,000 scholarships will be available in the first year, increasing over time until all Tennessee students who desire a scholarship are awarded one.

In summary, the idea that school choice funding is wholly dependent on the state budget and that private schools will be harmed by government funding is a myth not supported by the facts. School choice programs are funded in various ways and can provide families greater flexibility in choosing the best educational options for their children.

Myth: Government funding undermines parental control.

Fact: While some parents have the means and opportunity to choose other education options for their children, many families cannot afford private education or homeschool their children. School choice programs, like ESAs, aim to provide more equal access to quality education by allowing families to use government funding to cover educational expenses.

Protecting parental choice means ensuring that *all* families have access to the educational opportunities that best suit their children's needs. Expanding school choice options can help break the cycle of educational inequality and provide a better learning environment for all students.

Promoting transparency and accountability in all educational institutions is critical. Transparency can be achieved through open dialogue, community engagement, and a commitment to fostering an inclusive learning environment that respects diverse viewpoints.

In conclusion, school choice initiatives, like ESAs, can effectively address the issues in the public education system and provide better opportunities for students. By offering more options and empowering families to make informed decisions, we can work towards a more equal and effective education system that benefits all students.



Myth: School choice policies harm public education.

Fact: School choice strengthens public school accountability by giving parents options and putting schools on notice that they must deliver educational quality to retain students. Locking families into a specific school with no way out does nothing to improve education outcomes.

A 2021 [study](#) found that offering parents more school options enhanced academic outcomes for students whether they enrolled in public or private schools. Two additional studies conducted in 2014 and 2020 found that traditional public school students benefited from Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship program expansions. In the 2020 [study](#), public school students who lived in areas close to private school options experienced a rise in test scores and a decline in absences and suspensions, as the presence of nearby alternative school options increased the accountability faced by the traditional public school system. These positive effects were considerable for students from low-income families.

The intent of school choice policies is to help improve student outcomes in Tennessee. In 2022, only 30% of Tennessee fourth-grade students performed at or above the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) Proficient score. Black fourth-grade students had an average reading score that was 29 points lower than that of White students. Hispanic fourth-grade students had an average reading score that was 16 points lower than that of White students. Low-income fourth-grade students had an average reading score that was 23 points lower than that of students from middle- and high-income families.

Public schools are held harmless from cost changes for one full year. School choice can be the tide that lifts all boats by creating greater accountability and responsiveness among school administrators to the needs of students. Education choice unleashes opportunities and the future potential of all American children, especially those in underserved communities. Educational choice should not just be for wealthy families.

