

School Choice as Economic Growth Policy: Student Outcomes, Fiscal Impacts, Civic Life, and  
Community Renewal

Testimony on:

“Opening Doors to Opportunity: The Promise of Expanded School Choice and Alternatives to  
Four-Year College Degrees.”

for a hearing before the

House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
The Subcommittee on Economic Growth, Energy Policy, and Regulatory Affairs

Wednesday, September 17, 2025, at 10:00 a.m.

2247 Rayburn House Office Building

Testimony by:

Shaka Mitchell

Senior Fellow, American Federation for Children

[smitchell@federationforchildren.org](mailto:smitchell@federationforchildren.org)

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Shaka Mitchell, and I serve as a Senior Fellow at the American Federation for Children (AFC), the nation's largest school choice advocacy organization. At AFC, we seek to empower families, especially lower-income families, with the freedom to choose the best K-12 education for their children.

I am honored to appear before this Subcommittee to discuss how school choice is not only a matter of education policy but also an issue of economic growth, civic health, and long-term national competitiveness. Education is the foundation of opportunity in America. It shapes whether students become engaged citizens, productive workers, and contributors to their communities. Today, too many children are denied those opportunities. School choice offers a pathway forward. First, let us consider the situation our country is currently facing.

## **I. The Crisis in American Education**

On September 9, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) once again delivered deeply troubling news. The latest results in twelfth-grade reading and math, as well as eighth-grade science, show historic lows. These declines are not simply the result of the pandemic. The downward trajectory began long before 2020, but the pandemic accelerated the crisis, resulting in the lowest scores in a generation.

Compounding these low scores is a continued rise in chronic absenteeism, which leaves young people disconnected from school, unprepared for higher education, and not ready for the workforce or civic life. The consequences are stark: millions of graduates who cannot read at grade level, who lack basic numeracy, and who face diminished life opportunities and ability to be productive citizens.

This is not just an education problem. It is a workforce problem, a civic problem, and an economic problem. The United States cannot hope to remain globally competitive if its education system is producing historically low levels of achievement among its high school graduates. Fortunately, school choice offers a proven model for beginning to turn things around.

## **II. School Choice as a Path Forward**

Families deserve more than a one-size-fits-all education system. School choice allows parents to select the environment that best suits their children—whether that is a traditional public school, a public charter school, a private or parochial school, a micro-school, or a homeschool setting. Beginning as small pilot programs in the 1990s, school choice has gone mainstream, with 74 publicly funded private school choice programs in 32 states plus D.C. and Puerto Rico. Over 1.3 million students are enrolled in private choice programs today.

School choice is not about abandoning public education. It is about ensuring accountability and creating a broad menu of options that meet unique needs. Decades of research demonstrate that competition introduced by school choice improves outcomes not only for participating students

but also for those who remain in traditional public schools. By expanding options, we foster innovation, responsiveness, and higher performance across the entire system.

### **III. Student Learning Outcomes**

Evidence from across the nation confirms that school choice improves student achievement. In Milwaukee, the first city to establish a modern voucher program, rigorous evaluations found higher graduation rates among choice participants. In Washington, D.C., students receiving Opportunity Scholarships were more likely to graduate from high school than their peers.

Parents consistently report greater satisfaction with choice programs, citing safety, academic quality, and values alignment. These outcomes matter because education should not be measured only by dollars spent, but by the transformation of student lives and the outcomes those students go on to achieve. Of course, when evaluating education outcomes, it is natural to first examine student learning. Over 200 empirical studies have examined the impact of school choice on students, parents, schools, and state budgets – 84% found positive effects with most of the remainder finding neutral effects. Beyond those who participate in school choice programs, a now large body of research has examined the effect of choice programs on students who remain in public schools. 27 out of 30 studies show positive (27) or neutral (1) effects on the test scores of students who remain in public school. This debunks the myth that students “left behind” will falter. School choice brings with it the injection of innovation into public school systems that often lack financial and academic performance incentives.

### **IV. Evidence from Ohio’s EdChoice Program**

The most comprehensive, recent study of school choice comes from Ohio’s EdChoice program. Results of the evaluation by the Urban Institute were released this year and the findings are striking:

- College Enrollment: EdChoice students were 32 percent more likely to enroll in college than their public-school peers (64% vs. 48%).
- Bachelor’s Degree Attainment: They were 60 percent more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree (23% vs. 15%).
- Duration Matters: Students who remained in the program at least four years were 44 percent more likely to enroll in college.
- Male Students: Male participants were 86 percent more likely to graduate from college than their peers (22.5% vs. 12.1%).
- Lowest-Income Students: The poorest participants were 175 percent more likely to graduate from college (16.2% vs. 5.9%).
- Black Students: Black EdChoice students were 138 percent more likely to graduate from college than their peers (16.9% vs. 7.1%).

These are not marginal differences. They represent transformative shifts in life trajectories for low-income, minority, and otherwise disadvantaged students. School choice provides not just a temporary lifeline, but a permanent pathway to opportunity.

## V. Florida's Example: Choice vs. New Spending

Critics often argue that funds supporting school choice should instead be directed exclusively into traditional public school budgets. Florida's experience offers a clear answer to that argument.

Between 2003 and 2017, Florida invested about **\$2.5 billion** in its tax credit scholarship program, which grew from 15,000 to more than 100,000 students. Forthcoming research from my colleague and researcher, Patrick Graff, summarized in the attached memo, found the following:

- Expanding school choice produced **achievement gains for public school students** that were at least **11 times greater** than what equivalent spending increases would have generated for the same students. Over 15 years, public school students in high-choice areas advanced the equivalent of **120 extra days of learning in reading**—roughly two-thirds of a school year.
- Low-income students in urban schools gained even more: **140 extra days of learning**.
- Public schools facing greater competition also saw **lower suspension rates and fewer absences**.

To achieve this same effect using the school spending method alone, it would have cost Florida taxpayers over \$28 billion over that same fifteen-year time period. That is an additional cost to the state of almost \$2 billion more per year as compared to what the tax credit scholarship program achieved for an additional \$170 million per year.

At the federal level, Congress allocated **\$190 billion in ESSER funding** for pandemic recovery in 2020 and 2021. Research suggests that this unprecedented spending delivered only marginal gains. Estimates indicate it would take an additional **\$450 to \$650 billion** in spending simply to return students to pre-pandemic achievement levels. Florida's example demonstrates that growing school choice programs can provide a far greater return on investment than simply doing more of the same and increasing spending on traditional public school systems.

## VI. Civic Outcomes

Education is not only about preparing workers but also about cultivating citizens. Decades of research led by Dr. Patrick Wolf of the University of Arkansas demonstrates that students in school choice programs often score higher on measures of civic outcomes, such as political tolerance, civic knowledge, volunteering, and voting participation. For instance, a 2024 meta-analysis by Wolf and colleagues found strong evidence that private schooling can improve civil society. The authors found a statistically significant association between attending private school

and having more political tolerance, political participation, civic knowledge and skills, and volunteerism and social capital than students who attended public school.

These outcomes matter for the health of our democracy. When parents can choose, students are more likely to find environments that help them develop civic virtues that strengthen the social fabric. Moreover, I hypothesize that when parents are more actively engaged in the *educational* lives of their children, they see the efficacy of their actions and they engage more actively in *other civic activities*, such as voting.

## **VII. Life Outcomes and Competitive Effects**

Beyond immediate test scores, school choice impacts broader life outcomes. Research by Dr. David Figlio and colleagues shows that competitive effects – when public schools respond to the presence of nearby choice options – raise achievement for all students.

Longitudinal studies show higher graduation rates, greater college attendance, and lower crime rates among students who participate in school choice programs. These are life-altering results. Education choice not only improves academic performance but also reduces social costs by lowering incarceration and welfare dependence.

But data only tells part of the story. Behind each data point is a student whose has personally benefitted. One such student is Izzi. Izzi Uccello was born with spina bifida, a condition that often relegates children to a life of social and educational isolation. In kindergarten Izzi's mom, Becki, was told that her public school could not make special accommodations for a single student. At significant cost, Izzi was then enrolled in a private school which Becki says was the best place for Izzi to develop. She was in an inclusive setting where she could thrive. Izzi now has a robust academic and social life, participating in extracurricular activities, starting her own service initiatives, and even spending time alongside Becki advocating for other students in need of educational options.

## **VIII. The Point Beyond Money**

Ultimately, the question policymakers should ask is not how much money to allocate but where that money is going – and what are the results. Too often, the debate about education reform reduces to dollars and cents. But if we are only talking about money, we are missing the point. Education is about human potential. It is about pursuing the good, true, and beautiful. Practically speaking, it is about whether every child, regardless of ZIP code or family income, has this chance to flourish.

Yes, school choice saves taxpayer dollars, but more importantly, it changes the trajectory of lives and creates a stronger society. The true measure of education spending is not how much is invested, but what outcomes are achieved.

## **IX. Choice, Schools, and Economic Development**

When school choice programs expand, they stimulate the creation of new schools in communities that need them most. This expansion does not only serve students; it contributes to local economic development. New schools create jobs, attract families, foster trust, stabilize neighborhoods, and provide anchor institutions in struggling communities.

Offering a private-school choice programs in low-income neighborhoods reduces the incentives for financially secure families to leave the community, and the programs attract families currently outside the neighborhood. Likewise, businesses seeking to sell goods and services to the revitalizing community follow - bringing private investment dollars and creating jobs for local residents.

I saw this firsthand as the administrator for a charter school network in Nashville, Tennessee. We opened Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary school in an economically depressed corridor of Music City. Our school was surrounded by mobile home parks, used tire stores, and check cashing stores. But this community was also filled with students who, regardless of their family's economic resources, deserved an education that would allow them to fulfill their vision of the American Dream. That school went on to become a Reward School, one of the highest performing in the state. And after investing more than \$8 million in a brand new facility and providing a quality school option for the neighborhood, other community and capital enhancements followed. New businesses opened and property values have increased. Having a menu of quality education options in an area entices subsequent investment.

Another example of school choice programs encouraging innovative school models to operate in communities of need is seen in the Cristo Rey network of schools. This model, which combines rigorous academics with professional work-study, is just one of a growing number of unique school models changing lives every day. These schools prepare students for college, careers, and successful lives. What's more, school choice opens up opportunities beyond traditional education models as well.

## **X. Homeschooling as a Viable Option**

Homeschooling, which has experienced steady growth in recent years, exploded in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most notably, the number of Black households homeschooling their children went from 3.3% in early 2020 to 16.1% by that same fall – and has continued to grow and thrive, in many communities thanks to education savings accounts (ESAs), which allow families to access flexible education dollars. Once limited to a small number of families, homeschooling has become far more viable thanks to technology, online curricula, and support networks. Today, families can access advanced courses, extracurriculars, and specialized instruction through education savings accounts and flexible funding programs.

Homeschooling is no longer an isolated choice but part of a diverse ecosystem of education options, ensuring that every family can find the right fit for their child. Whether happening fully in-person, or in various online and hybrid modes, thousands of students can access a customized educational experience thanks to choice programs that allow dollars to follow students.

## **XI. Opening Nontraditional Pathways to Success**

The promise of school choice extends beyond traditional classrooms. Education must prepare students for tomorrow's workforce. For some, this means a four-year degree. For others, it means apprenticeships, technical training, or immediate entry into careers.

School choice enables these pathways. Programs such as ESAs allow families to access apprenticeships, career academies, and specialized technical training. These innovations not only prepare students for economic self-sufficiency but also align with workforce needs, ensuring that America remains competitive in a changing global economy. For instance, many charter schools in Indianapolis give high school students the ability to gain exposure to jobs while still in school. The Rooted School, a Mayor-approved charter school in Indianapolis, allows high schoolers to compete for paid internships with local technology partners. These internships are designed around the roles and tasks that businesses typically hire for in college interns or entry-level employees.

Rather than merely pursuing a higher-education degree, choice programs give many students a broader range of options: gain college credit while still in high school (thereby reducing the eventual cost of a college degree), earn skills-based certifications that make the student a more attractive job candidate, and/or earn both experience and a paycheck in an internship. No single path is right for the 55 million students in the U.S., hence the need for freedom in education.

The final pathway worth mentioning is that of military service. While recruitment numbers have rebounded slightly in recent years, overall service recruitment is well-below the number from 10, 20, and 30 years ago. One factor is the lack of academic readiness among new recruits. About a quarter of the Army's recruits went through the soldier prep program so that they could take remedial coursework in the hopes of scoring high enough on entrance exams to be allowed to serve our nation. To be clear, this is not a military recruitment problem – it is a K-12 readiness crisis. Just as the number of college- and career-ready graduates is increased by school choice programs, so too is the number of military-ready graduates.

## **Conclusion**

The NAEP results highlight a crisis that has been growing for decades. Yet we have evidence of a way forward.

School choice improves long-term outcomes for students. It strengthens public schools through healthy competition. It delivers a far greater return on investment than traditional spending increases. And it opens the door to apprenticeships, technical training, and innovative models that prepare students for success in both college and careers.

If we focus only on money, we will miss the human stakes. The real question before us is whether we will give families the freedom to choose the education that best serves their children, and whether we will allow communities to grow through educational innovation. To that end, I

thank this body for its passage of the Federal Tax Credit Program as part of the One Big Bill. That program allows scholarships to be given to millions of students so that they can choose the private, charter, or public educational experience that best meets their needs. This body can further cement it's educational legacy by reauthorizing and expanding the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. I've seen firsthand how this 20 year-old program has changed the lives of thousands of Washington, D.C. children.

On behalf of the American Federation for Children, I thank you for your attention and urge Congress to support policies that expand educational freedom for all families.

Respectfully submitted,



Shaka Mitchell, Senior Fellow  
American Federation for Children

## Endnotes

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