

# K–12 Schooling Alternatives

## BACKGROUND

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One of the most hotly debated topics in K–12 education is schools of choice (or “school choice” or, simply, “choice”), whereby parents are permitted to choose the venue in which their children will be educated. In Michigan, school choice generally refers to the following:

### GLOSSARY

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#### **Charter school**

*A school, sometimes having a particular education approach, that is exempt from certain state regulations; also known as a public school academy.*

#### **Choice**

*Refers to “schools of choice,” an option that parents sometimes have that permits them to elect to send their child to a school other than the one assigned by the local district.*

#### **Foundation allowance**

*The per pupil amount of state funding that pays for most of schools’ operating costs.*

#### **Home schooling**

*Educating a child at home rather than sending him/her to a public or private school.*

#### **Interdistrict choice**

*A form of school choice whereby parents may send a child to a public school outside of the school district in which they reside.*

#### **Intermediate school district (ISD)**

*An educational service agency that provides support to school districts in a certain geographic area (frequently approximates the county).*

#### **Voucher**

*A form of state aid that allots to parents a certain amount of public money that they may use to pay for their children’s education at any school.*

- Interdistrict (cross-district) choice
- Charter schools
- Vouchers
- Home schooling

#### **Interdistrict Choice**

Since 1994, when Proposal A (the school-finance reform initiative) passed, the amount of state funding a school district receives depends more on the number of students it enrolls than previously was the case. Schools now receive from the state a certain amount (the foundation allowance) per pupil; thus, if a student leaves his/her current school district for any reason, the district’s state funding is reduced. Losing students can have very serious financial consequences for a district: for example, a district receiving the minimum foundation allowance (\$6,500) in FY 2001–02 will forgo \$162,500 if it loses just 25 students.

School choice in Michigan has been permitted since passage of Public Act 300 of 1996, but it is not unlimited. Students may transfer only to another district that is located within (1) the boundaries of the intermediate school district (ISD) in which they live or (2) a contiguous ISD. In addition, there are certain restrictions.

- School districts may choose whether to participate in the schools of choice program—that is, whether they will accept transferring students.
- Districts that choose to participate must publish a list of grades in which they will accept nonresident students and the number of students they will allow in each.
- Schools must accept students on a first-come-first-served basis; they may not discriminate on the basis of race, academic ability, or any other factor.
- Parents must provide their own transportation.

In the 1996–97 school year, the first that the law was in effect, almost 8,000 Michigan students attended a school outside their home district. In 2001–02 the number more than quadrupled, to about 33,500.

Of the state’s 554 local school districts, two-thirds (64 percent) are accepting students from outside their district. Since more districts are expected to experience declining enrollment in coming years, it is likely that in the future more will participate with the aim of increasing their revenue.

### Charter Schools

In 1994, as part of school-finance reform, lawmakers passed P.A. 362 of 1993, the so-called charter-school law. The law permits “public school academies” to be established. Michigan was among the first states to take such a step, and, according to one education-reform organization, the Michigan law is one of the most far-reaching in the nation—second only to Arizona’s and Delaware’s in the amount of autonomy given charters, the kind allowed, and other factors.

Michigan charter schools operate under the auspices of an *authorizer*, one of four types of public entity: a state university, school district, ISD, or community college. The authorizer is responsible for monitoring the charter school’s progress and its adherence to state regulations as well as providing other oversight; the authorizer may revoke a school’s charter if it believes the school is not performing satisfactorily. The number of charter schools that state universities collectively may authorize is 150, and this ceiling was reached in FY 2000–01, meaning that universities may not charter additional schools unless an existing one closes. Although there is no cap on the other types of authorizers, they are confined to authorizing charters in their service area, whereas a university may authorize schools statewide.

Charter schools are subject to most of the same laws as traditional schools; for example, they must employ only certified teachers, are prohibited from charging tuition or teaching a religion-based curriculum, and must accept students on a first-come-first-served basis. Unlike traditional public schools, however, they need not (1) accept all applicants if they do not have available space, which means they can control school and class size, (2) hire unionized teachers, or (3) participate in collective bargaining.

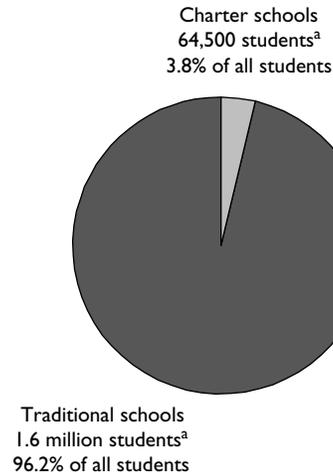
Currently, Michigan has approximately 190 charter schools. Only a minority of Michigan youngsters attends a charter school (see Exhibit 1). The amount of state funding lost to traditional schools is about \$420 million (out of \$11 billion).

### Vouchers

Under a voucher system, the state would provide funding for parents to send their children to a school of their choice, be it public or private. A voucher system would be a substantial departure from the current system, where state aid flows only to public school districts and parents of private-school students foot the bill themselves.

Five states—Florida, Maine, Ohio, Vermont, and Wisconsin—currently offer voucher programs that pay tuition at private schools. Most are confined either to a specific city

## EXHIBIT I. Enrollment in Michigan Public Charter and Traditional Schools, FY 2001–02



SOURCE: House Fiscal Agency, using data from the Michigan Department of Education.

<sup>a</sup>Full-time equivalent, blended pupil numbers; these are the figures used to calculate schools’ state aid.

(e.g., Milwaukee) or are targeted to students who have an identifiable risk of academic failure. Six other states offer tax credits for private-school expenses or scholarships, and some observers consider this to be a form of voucher.

Article VIII, section 2, of the Michigan Constitution specifically prohibits using public monies to fund private- or religious-school education. This means that to have a voucher system in Michigan, a majority of voters must approve a constitutional amendment. In 2000 Michigan voters turned down, by more than a two-to-one margin, a ballot proposal to institute a sweeping voucher program in the state. The measure would have allowed vouchers in any district having a graduation rate of less than two-thirds or in which a majority of voters approved a voucher system. Potentially, all of the state’s districts could have been voucher districts. Had it passed, the amendment would have created the first statewide voucher system in the nation in which any district and any student living there could participate.

The U.S. Supreme Court currently is considering a pivotal voucher case, *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, regarding whether a six-year-old voucher program in Cleveland violates the Constitution because 96 percent of the students in this state-sponsored program attend schools that have a religious affiliation. If the decision, expected in July 2002, upholds the program, it could lead to an increase of such

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programs nationwide; if it rules against the program, the question of whether vouchers may be used at religious-affiliated schools may be laid to rest permanently.

### Home Schooling

The Revised School Code of 1976 states that a child is not required to attend a public school if s/he is

being educated by his or her parent or legal guardian at the child's home in an organized educational program that is appropriate given the age, intelligence, ability, and any psychological limitations of the child, in the subject areas of reading, mathematics, science, history, civics, literature, writing, and English grammar.

This provision makes home schooling legal in Michigan. The state's home-school laws are among the least restrictive in the nation—only a handful of other states have laws that are as or more permissive than Michigan's. See Exhibit 2 for a comparison of states' home-schooling requirements.

The Michigan law requires home-schooling parents to teach certain subjects, but this is one of the few requirements it imposes. Home-school parents may choose their own curriculum as long as it addresses the subjects required by the state. They may select their own textbooks, issue their own diplomas, and, if they wish, teach a religion- or philosophy-based curriculum. Home-schooled students are not required to take Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) tests, and there are very little data collected on the education performance of home-schooled students.

Although there are various reasons why people choose to educate their children at home, among the most commonly expressed are dissatisfaction with the quality of public education, concern about violence in the public schools, a desire for the child to have individualized instruction, and preference for a curriculum that reflects parents' values, religious or otherwise.

The number of home-school students is growing. In the decade from school years 1990-91 to 2000-01, the num-

## EXHIBIT 2. Home-Schooling Requirements, States and the District of Columbia

States with High Regulation <sup>a</sup>	States with Moderate Regulation <sup>b</sup>	States with Low Regulation <sup>c</sup>	States Requiring No Contact with State <sup>d</sup>
Maine	Arkansas	Alabama	Alaska
Massachusetts	Colorado	Arizona	Idaho
Minnesota	Connecticut	California	Illinois
New York	Florida	Delaware	Indiana
North Dakota	Georgia	District of Columbia	<b>Michigan</b>
Pennsylvania	Hawaii	Kansas	Missouri
Rhode Island	Iowa	Kentucky	New Jersey
Utah	Louisiana	Mississippi	Oklahoma
Vermont	Maryland	Montana	Texas
Washington	North Carolina	Nebraska	
West Virginia	Nevada	New Mexico	
	New Hampshire	Wyoming	
	Ohio		
	Oregon		
	South Carolina		
	South Dakota		
	Tennessee		
	Virginia		
	Wisconsin		

SOURCE: Home School Legal Defense Association, Purcellville, VA.

NOTE: The year for which this information is presented was not indicated.

<sup>a</sup>State requires parents to notify the state that they are home schooling, submit achievement test scores and/or professional evaluation of student progress, and perhaps meet other requirements (e.g., use state-approved curriculum, meet teaching qualifications, submit to home visits by state officials).

<sup>b</sup>State requires parents to notify the state that they are home schooling, submit achievement test scores and/or professional evaluation of student progress.

<sup>c</sup>State requires parents only to notify the state that they are home schooling.

<sup>d</sup>State imposes no requirement on parents to initiate contact with the state.

ber is believed to have more than doubled—from around 825 students to 1,915. Because parents are not required to report that they are home schooling their children, these numbers are estimates and likely to be low.

## DISCUSSION

The 1998–99 education poll, conducted by Public Sector Consultants, Inc., found that 58 percent of respondents statewide believe that students should be allowed to attend any public school they choose, even one outside their home district. The same poll found that 53 percent agree in concept with giving public money to private schools. Alternatives to public schooling are seen by some as the solution to the ills of public schooling and by others as a destructive force in education, and the debate may be expected to continue for years to come.

### Choice and Competition

Supporters of school choice claim that choice and its resulting competition among schools is necessary to improve education quality in Michigan. They argue that if public schools lose their “education monopoly,” they will have to respond more quickly and appropriately to changing student and parent demands. This market-driven approach, choice supporters say, will help the education system identify good and bad schools and find ways either to improve or eliminate the ones not serving students well.

Supporters of school choice also believe that there is no one best way to learn or teach, therefore students and educators should be entitled to choose among diverse programs, teaching styles, and school schedules. They contend that students will be better and more enthusiastic learners if they may choose a school or program compatible with their learning style, and teachers and administrators will be more enthusiastic and effective in schools that support their personal philosophy of education. The result, they posit, is better education.

Opponents of the choice concept counter that the market analogy is not appropriate for K–12 education. They argue that unlike businesses, schools do not have control over the “raw material”—the students—who enter their halls. They assert that by draining resources from traditional public education, school choice actually is detrimental, rather than beneficial, to the quality of local public schools. They argue that a healthy system of public schools is necessary in a democratic society and weakening the public school system to accommodate the needs of a few is not in the best interest of the state or nation.

Opponents also argue that public education can be best improved by working within the current system through

such improvements as adopting a statewide core curriculum (that is, ensuring that all schools teach the same basic subject matter) and giving schools the technical assistance they need to deal with low levels of academic performance. They also assert that there now are many more choices than in the past within traditional public schools themselves, and the needs of individual students usually are accommodated.

### Charter Schools

Charter-school supporters say that these schools give parents more options, foster competition among public schools, and are laboratories where education innovation can be explored and the findings used to help improve all schools. They point out that there is a strong parent demand for charter schools, as evidenced by the waiting lists for admission. They also say that charters serve many of the state’s economically disadvantaged students and point out that the majority of charter schools are in urban areas, where traditional public schools frequently face the most difficulty.

Opponents contend that charter schools are damaging local public schools by taking funding from them. Moreover, they assert that charters “skim” students from traditional schools—that is, for the most part they take the better students and also the least expensive to educate (lower-grade students and those without special needs). Also, since charters typically do not hire unionized teachers (who generally draw higher salaries and benefits than non-union teachers) and are permitted to limit the number of students they enroll, they may have smaller class sizes, which gives them an unfair advantage in competing for students. All of this, opponents say, further hurts traditional schools. They further contend that studies, such as that conducted by Public Sector Consultants in 2000, find a lack of education innovation in charter schools, rendering invalid the argument that charter schools serve as education laboratories to develop and test new teaching methods. They also point to a recent state audit report that finds that charter schools are not sufficiently monitored by their authorizers, and they argue that these schools should come under much closer scrutiny.

Proponents are fighting to get the cap on the number of university-chartered schools increased from the current limit of 150. They argue that as about three-quarters of the charters are authorized by universities, the cap unfairly limits growth in the number of charter schools. Charter-school opponents disagree, contending that until there is greater oversight over existing schools, new ones should not be started. At this writing, the issue is under study by a task force appointed by the legislature, and lawmakers have agreed to delay their vote on raising

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the cap until the task force's report, which is expected soon, has been submitted.

### Vouchers

Voucher supporters argue that parents of private-school students pay taxes just as parents of public school students do, but they do not receive the same benefit from their tax dollars. They also point out that wealthy families can afford to “escape” the public schools if they are dissatisfied with them, but low-income parents, who cannot afford private-school tuition, are forced to place their children in a local public school whether they feel the school is adequate or not. Vouchers, they contend, would provide equity for these parents and their children.

Voucher opponents counter that private-school parents voluntarily have opted not to send their children to public schools, thus they voluntarily have chosen to forgo the tax benefit derived from public education. They further assert that using public funds to help pay for private schooling would be expensive and drain substantial resources from public schools. Finally, they object to vouchers because they believe their use would violate separation of church and state in that the vouchers, which could be used to attend private, religious schools, would be paid for with public dollars.

### Home Schooling

In regard to home schooling, many supporters feel that whatever an individual's reasons for home schooling, it is a parent's civil right. They argue that in public schools, children may encounter ideas, philosophies, and even physical danger to which their parents do not want them exposed. Opponents fear that home-schooled students will suffer from lack of socialization with other pupils and argue that the state should monitor the academic progress of home-schooled students. They believe that home-schooled children easily could “fall through the cracks” educationally unless there is more state monitoring and assessment.

See also K-12 Funding; K-12 Quality and Assessment.

## FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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Charter Schools Office  
Central Michigan University  
2520 South University Park Drive  
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859  
(989) 774-2100  
(989) 774-7893 FAX  
[www.cmucso.org](http://www.cmucso.org)

Home School Legal Defense Association  
P.O. Box 1152  
Purcellville, VA 20134  
(540) 338-8899  
(540) 338-2733 FAX  
[www.hslda.org](http://www.hslda.org)

Michigan Association of Public School Academies  
215 South Washington Square, Suite 210  
Lansing, MI 48933  
(517) 374-9167  
(517) 374-9197 FAX  
[www.charterschools.org](http://www.charterschools.org)

Michigan Association of School Administrators  
1001 Centennial Way, Suite 300  
Lansing, MI 48917  
(517) 327-5910  
(517) 327-0771 FAX  
[www.gomasa.org](http://www.gomasa.org)

Michigan Department of Education  
Hannah Building  
608 West Allegan Street  
P.O. Box 30008  
Lansing, MI 48909  
(517) 373-3324  
(517) 373-4022 FAX  
[www.michigan.gov/mde](http://www.michigan.gov/mde)

Michigan Education Association  
1216 Kendale Boulevard  
East Lansing, MI 48826  
(800) 292-1934  
(517) 337-5598 FAX  
[www.mea.org](http://www.mea.org)