

K–12 Schooling Alternatives

GLOSSARY

Charter or academy schools

Public schools that have a particular focus (e.g., technology, performing arts) or philosophy (e.g., “back-to-basics,” gradeless); they are exempt from some of the regulations imposed on traditional public schools.

Choice

Refers to “schools of choice,” the concept of allowing parents and students to select the school the student will attend instead of the child’s attending the school assigned by the local district.

Home schooling

Parents educating their children at home instead of sending them to a public or private school.

Interdistrict choice

A form of school choice whereby parents may send their child(ren) to a public school outside of their home district (there may be some restrictions, geographic or otherwise, on the districts in which a child may be enrolled).

Intradistrict choice

A form of school choice whereby parents may send their child(ren) to any school within the local school district.

Statewide open enrollment

A form of interdistrict choice whereby parents may send their children to any school in the state.

Universal tuition tax credit (UTTC)

A tax credit for tuition paid by parents for their children’s education; universal refers to its application to both public and private schooling.

Voucher

A system whereby parents are allotted a certain amount of public money, which they may use to pay for their children’s education at any school; depending on how the system is set up, vouchers could be used at only public schools or at both public and private schools.

BACKGROUND

Over time, many reforms to improve the quality of education in K–12 schools have been explored. At present, one of the most popular is schools of choice (or “school choice” or, simply, “choice”), which encompasses several alternatives, including

- interdistrict choice,
- statewide open enrollment,
- charter schools,
- vouchers, and
- home schooling.

One of the basic tenets of school choice is that allowing parents and students to choose the school the children attend will introduce competition into public education and provide incentives for schools to improve.

Because of the growing conviction that competition can improve public education, school choice has been gaining support in Michigan and nationwide. Michigan has been relatively aggressive in introducing choice into the public school system and, in the past four years, has introduced both intradistrict choice and charter schools. There also is interest in a voucher system that would allow parents to send their children to any public or private school at public expense.

Interdistrict Choice and Statewide Open Enrollment

The school finance reforms passed in 1994 (Proposal A) give teeth to the idea that school choice can provide schools with incentives to improve. Under the reforms, the amount of state funding a school receives is now much more dependent than before on the number of students it enrolls. Therefore, if students leave their current school, the school receives less state funding. This can have very serious consequences: for example, a district receiving per pupil revenue at the state average will forgo more than \$163,725 if it loses 25 students.

The 1996–97 School Aid Act (P.A. 300 of 1996) permits students, for the first time, to attend school outside their home district. Before then, students who wished to attend a school in another district first had to obtain permission from their home district, which frequently was denied because with the student would go some state funding. Now, the home district has no say in the matter. Public Act 300 thus became Michigan’s first “schools of choice” law.

The new law does impose some limitations. First, it allows students to transfer only to districts within their own intermediate school district (ISD), usually corresponding roughly to county boundaries. Second, school districts may choose not to participate in schools of choice—that is, they can refuse to *accept* students from other districts.

Approximately 0.07 percent of the state's public school students are participating in the intradistrict schools of choice program. In the 1996–97 school year, the first year that the law was in effect, almost 8,000 Michigan students attended schools outside their home district. This year (1997–98), the number has increased 39 percent, to approximately 11,000. Of the state's roughly 560 school districts, almost half (45 percent) are accepting students from outside their district. Between the last school year and the current one, 63 more schools opted into intradistrict schools of choice, while four withdrew.

Charter Schools

In 1994, as part of the state's school finance reform, lawmakers passed P.A. 362 of 1993, the so-called charter school law. The law allowed “academy” schools for the first time; Michigan is one of the first states to take such a step. According to one education reform organization, Michigan's charter school law is one of the strongest in the nation—second only to Arizona's in the amount of autonomy it gives schools, the kind of schools it allows, the amount of per pupil funding it guarantees, and other factors. The intent of the law is to provide more choices for parents, promote education innovation, and foster competition within public schools; sponsors hope that such schools will “break the mold” of public education and stimulate innovation in teaching methods and curricula.

Charter schools operate under the auspices of an “authorizer,” one of four types of public entity: a state university, school district, intermediate school district, or community college. Each university, school district, and so on may decide whether to authorize academies. For example, Central Michigan University has authorized more than 40 schools, while others have authorized none.

Any individual or nonprofit group may apply to any authorizer for permission to start a school. The authorizer may accept or reject this application, based on the applicant's education plan, qualifications, or other criteria. If the authorizer accepts the application, it issues a “charter” (contract) to the applicant, giving it permission to operate. The authorizer is responsible for monitoring the school's progress, adherence to state regulations, and other performance measures. An authorizer may revoke the charter of any school it believes is not performing satisfactorily. The State Board of Education is responsible for ensuring that the authorizers and their charters comply with state and federal law.

Public Act 362, as enacted, was quite permissive in the latitude it allowed academy schools. For example, unlike traditional schools, charter schools were permitted to hire uncertified teachers. However, a 1994 lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the schools resulted in revisions to the law, and academy schools now are subject to most of the laws with which traditional schools must comply; for example, academies now must employ only certified teachers (but unlike traditional public schools, they need not hire unionized teachers nor must they participate in collective bargaining). Like traditional public schools, they are prohibited from charging tuition or teaching a religion-based curricula. They also must accept students on a first-come-first-served basis and may not discriminate based on race, religion, academic history, athletic ability, or other such criteria.

In the current school year, there are approximately 100 charter schools operating in Michigan. Enrollment is 21,000 students, or 1.3 percent of the state's public school population. Charter schools range in size from 15 to 700 students. In scope, charter schools range from being very progressive and using new teaching philosophies to being very traditional and stressing the basics. Charter schools have enrolled a relatively large share of racial minorities. For example, African-Americans comprise only 14 percent of the state population but 58 percent of charter enrollments (1995–96).

The state's charter school law limits to 100 the number of academies that may operate in the state; this will be raised to 150 by 2000, and there is some support for raising the cap further or removing it entirely.

As mentioned, the charter school law was challenged soon after its passage on the ground that it violated the state constitution's prohibition on spending public dollars for private schools. The lawsuit charged that because the state had little control over them, they were, in fact, private. The Ingham County Circuit Court agreed, and blocked payment of state funds to the schools. The charter school law quickly was amended, to give the state more oversight and academies less autonomy, and charter schools were allowed to continue. In 1997 the Michigan Supreme Court ruled that with these changes the state has sufficient control over academies to qualify them as public, and they are entitled to public funds. With this ruling, the last major legal challenge to the schools has been put to rest.

Statewide Open Enrollment

Vouchers

Michigan currently does not have a voucher system, although such a system likely will be debated in coming years. Under a voucher system, the state would provide every student with a voucher that s/he could use to pay tuition at the school of his/her choice; the school would redeem the voucher with the state. Some adherents of the concept would restrict its application to intradistrict use; others would permit statewide use. Some would include only public schools; others would extend it to private schools as well.

The greatest controversy over vouchers is that it could lead to public dollars being used for private education, including religious schools. Article VIII, section 2 of the Michigan Constitution specifically prohibits using public monies to fund private or religious school education, which means that to apply vouchers to private schooling, the voters would have to approve a constitutional amendment.

Universal Tuition Tax Credit

One proposal to expand choice in Michigan is for a universal tuition tax credit (UTTC), a concept recently put forward by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. Instead of receiving a voucher, a UTTC would allow taxpayers to take a tax credit against their income, property, or business tax as reimbursement for tuition paid to either a public or private school. Voter approval to change the state constitution would be necessary for a UTTC, as the constitution prohibits using tax credits to support attending a nonpublic school. A group (School Choice YES!) has announced that it will circulate a petition to put the universal tuition tax credit issue on the 2000 ballot.

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, spelling, mathematics, science, history, civics, literature, writing, and English grammar." This provision of the school code makes home schooling legal in Michigan. The state's home school laws are among the least restrictive in the nation—only about seven other states have laws that are as or more permissive than Michigan's.

The number of home school students is growing. It more than doubled between school years 1989–90 and 1996–97, rising from 887 students to 2,361. Although the reason that people choose to educate their own children varies from family to family, among the most commonly expressed are dissatisfaction with the quality of public education, concern about violence in public schools, a wish for instruction that is particularly responsive to their child's special needs, a desire for individualized instruction; or a preference for a curriculum that reflects their own values, religious or otherwise.

Although the law requires parents of home schoolers to teach reading, spelling, and so on, this is one of the few requirements it imposes. Home school parents may choose their own curriculum as long as it addresses the subjects listed in the code. They may select their own textbooks, issue their own diplomas, and, if they wish, teach a religious- or philosophical-based curriculum. Home-schooled students are not required to take the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) or other standardized tests and need not engage in learning for a minimum number of days or hours annually as public school students must.

Home school teachers must be certified by the state, although this requirement is waived in certain circumstances. Many home school families join together, to pool resources and teaching time. Home schoolers have many resources from which to draw for their curriculum and teaching materials, including a number of Web sites devoted to the practice. Some home schoolers practice “distance learning,” whereby their home school is linked electronically to other teachers and other classrooms.

In 1994 an attempt to combine home and charter schooling received a good deal of public attention. A group of home school families tried to start a charter school by linking their home schools electronically under one name, the Noah Webster Academy; if successful, they could receive state funding, as does any other charter school. State funds were denied because in the absence of a single site, the state could not provide the oversight it is required to exercise over all public schools. But the 1997 Michigan Supreme Court decision referred to above, which found that charter schools are public schools, has re-raised the question of whether the Noah Webster Academy is entitled to receive state funds; spokespersons for the school say they will re-apply for state funding.

DISCUSSION

It appears that there is considerable public support for school choice. The 1996 Education Poll, conducted by Public Sector Consultants, Inc., found that

41 percent of residents polled statewide strongly agree that allowing schools of choice is “a good way to improve schools” and an additional 27 percent somewhat agree. This level of support for school choice is considerably higher than that found when the same question was asked two years before, when only 21 percent expressed strong agreement and an additional 29 percent somewhat agreed.

Supporters of school choice believe 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. Proponents 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.

Choice adherents further maintain that free selection also encourages much-needed parent involvement. Studies show repeatedly that students whose parents are involved in their schooling perform better academically; just making a choice involves parents in their child’s education, and because the schools that parents choose reflect their values and education priorities, it is likely that their involvement will be ongoing.

Choice opponents say that public education can be improved by working within the current system. They say that the effect of schools of choice on academic achievement and student well-being are not well understood, and they point to conflicting research findings about the outcome of choice programs. School betterment, they contend, would be best achieved through such improvements as adopting a statewide core curriculum (ensuring that all schools teach the same basic subject matter) and implementing school-improvement plans (plans the state requires schools to develop so as to improve the academic performance of their students). They say that public schools are making great strides in improving curriculum, raising standards, and making other improvements.

Choice opponents say that public schools are not performing well are unfair—they point out that the demands on education have greatly expanded over the past two decades. Public school defenders contend that expectations for student learning are rising and becoming increasingly more complex—students now are expected to develop critical thinking skills, computer literacy, and other new skills. They also say that the problems currently faced by schools—violence, drugs, lack of parent involvement, rising cost of computer education—are making it more difficult to educate students, all while the expectations are rising. They argue that school choice is not a magic pill—these problems will continue to run counter to education achievement, whether we have school choice or not.

Supporters of choice claim 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. Many opponents say the market analogy is not valid. They argue that unlike industry, schools do not have control over the “raw material”—the students—who enter their halls. They also say that unresponsiveness and other such shortcomings in schools should be dealt with directly and specifically, through evaluation and accountability, not indirectly through wholesale change that runs the risk of adversely affecting good schools as well as poor.

Choice supporters point out that in a democratic society people are allowed to choose public officeholders, a job, a place to live, a church to attend, and so forth. They believe that parents have the right also to choose a school, and the current system denies them this right. They also make the point that the ability to select a preferred school already exists but is limited to parents who have enough money to (1) move to and live in the attendance area of the school they prefer or (2) pay tuition, transportation, and other expenses associated with a private school.

Some choice opponents point out that choice is not as democratic as it might appear—it can be used as a way to sort students according to socioeconomic status, ability, or other factors. Good schools, they claim, will be in demand and will admit only preferred students (who frequently are from more affluent families). In doing so, they will “skim” the best students away from schools, while average and below-average students (frequently from middle- and lower-income families) will be left in schools with diminishing parent involvement, fewer of the best-and-brightest students, and fewer resources with which to educate pupils. This will have the effect of sorting students according to ability, parent involvement, and financial circumstance, and opponents fear that choice also could permit students to be sorted according to race, which would undermine basic equality and past efforts to desegregate schools.

Choice supporters point to evidence to the contrary. They say, for example, that many charter schools have been started in urban areas, not suburban areas as some had predicted. They also counter the state’s current school choice law protects against “skimming” of any kind—it requires charter schools to accept students without regard to income, race, academic or athletic ability, or any other criteria. Choice opponents contend that there is always a way to circumvent such state requirements. Some assert, for example, that the reason some wealthy, suburban districts have opted out of the intradistrict choice program is to avoid having to accept students from poorer or racially different areas.

Insofar as a uniform tuition tax credit is concerned, supporters believe such a tax break is only fair, since parents who pay tuition, such as those sending their children to private schools, pay twice for their children’s education—once in the form of tuition and once in the form of state and local taxes that go toward public schools, which they don’t use. Opponents to the credit contend that it is a veiled attempt to get a voucher system in place. They point out that poor people will not receive much of a tax break, since they pay little income tax to begin with.

K-12 SCHOOLING ALTERNATIVES

In regard to home schooling, most supporters feel strongly that whatever an individual's reasons for home schooling, it is a parent's civil right. Opponents fear that home-schooled students will suffer from lack of socialization with other pupils and argue that even if home school students socialize with other home schoolers, these interactions will lack social, economic, and racial diversity. They also express concern that parents may not have the education or experience necessary to teach their children. Critics also complain that it is very difficult to monitor the academic progress of home-schooled students so as to make sure that they are learning and being taught the required subjects.

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

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Charter Schools Office
Central Michigan University
208 Warriner Hall
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859
(517) 774-2100
(517) 774-7893 FAX
<http://charter.ehhs.cmich.edu/>

Home Schooling Office
Michigan Department of Education
P.O. Box 30008
Lansing, MI 48909
Phone: (517) 373-0796
Fax: (517) 373-3936 FAX

Mackinac Center for Public Policy
140 West Main Street
P.O. Box 568
Midland, MI 48640
(517) 631-0900
(517) 832-0666 FAX
www.mackinac.org

Michigan Association of Public School Academies
Michigan National Tower
124 West Allegan, Suite 750
Lansing, MI 48933
(517) 374-9167
(517) 374-9197 FAX
www.charterschools.org/core.html

Michigan Association of School Administrators
1001 Centennial Way, Suite 300
Lansing, MI 48917
(517) 327-5910
(517) 327-0771 FAX
www.melg.org

Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals
1001 Centennial Way, Suite 100
Lansing, MI 48917
(517) 327-5315
(517) 327-5360 FAX
www.melg.org/massp

Michigan Education Association
1216 Kendale Boulevard
P.O. Box 2573
East Lansing, MI 48826
(517) 332-6551
www.mea.org

Office of School Program Services
Public School Academy Program
Michigan Department of Education
P.O. Box 30008
Lansing, MI 48909
(517) 373-4631
(517) 241-0197 FAX

School Choice YES!
P.O. Box 349
Midland, MI 48640-0349
(517) 839-4500
(517) 839-4506 FAX

Schools of Choice Office
Michigan Department of Education
P.O. Box 30008
Lansing, MI 48909
(517) 241-2732
(517) 335-4575 FAX

TEACH Michigan Education Fund
913 West Holmes Road, Suite 265
Lansing, MI 48910
(517) 394-4870
(517) 394-0093 FAX
<http://teach-mi.org>