

Quick Definition

School choice is a policy based on the theory of the free market: a school must meet the needs of the consumer (i.e., parents and students) in order to stay in business. Following that theory, if a school does not meet the needs of its students, parents and students should have the option of seeking better education opportunities elsewhere. Among the various forms of school choice are magnet schools, open enrollment, vouchers, tax credits and deductions, virtual schools, and homeschooling.

Private school choice—which allows parents to use government-funded vouchers to send their children to private schools—touches on an array of tough questions about parents’ and students’ rights, church-state separation, and the very nature of public schools. By comparison, public school choice, in its various forms, gives parents the option of transferring their children out of lower-performing public schools to higher-performing or specialized public schools.¹

¹ Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. “Choice.” Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/rc/issues/choice>.

Relevancy to Georgia

The premise behind school choice is that educational options for students and parents should be increased through alternatives, both public and private, to the traditional public school model. Over the years, the term "choice" has grown to encompass a variety of options, including magnet schools, open enrollment, vouchers or scholarships, tax credits and deductions, and homeschooling.² Georgia's other choice options include dual and concurrent enrollment, career academies, and the Georgia Virtual School.

Magnet Schools

Magnet schools are public schools that offer distinct curricular options and instructional approaches to draw students from a variety of neighborhoods in a geographic area. Typically, magnet schools offer specialized educational opportunities to all students in a district or surrounding districts to promote voluntary racial and socioeconomic balance, as well as to focus on specialized curricula. Several factors distinguish the operating policies of magnet schools from their traditional public school counterparts, including rigorous admissions criteria, lotteries for open seats in the school, and percentages of enrollment allocated for neighborhood residents.³

In Georgia, legal statute defines a magnet school as a public elementary school, public secondary school, public elementary education center, or public secondary education center that offers a special curriculum capable of attracting substantial numbers of students of different racial backgrounds. Currently, 80 magnet schools operate in 11 school systems within the state of Georgia. These schools offer a variety of specialized academic programs, including health and science, law, fine arts, International Baccalaureate, technology, and foreign languages.

Open Enrollment

Open enrollment policies allow students to enroll in a public school that is outside of their immediate enrollment zone. There are two distinct types of open enrollment policies. *Intradistrict* school choice enables families to choose a public school from within their local school system. *Interdistrict* school choice allows families to attend a public school outside of their local school system. Whether intradistrict or interdistrict, states' open enrollment policies typically apply only to targeted groups of students (e.g., low-income students or students in low-performing schools).

The state of Georgia has enacted three open enrollment policies. The first policy is an intradistrict/mandatory policy; the second is an intradistrict/mandatory and

² National Conference of State Legislatures. "School Choice." Retrieved from <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/schoolchoice.htm>.

³ Education Commission of the States. "Magnet/Specialized Schools." Retrieved from <http://www.ecs.org>; Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. "Choice." Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/rc/issues/choice>.

interdistrict/mandatory policy; the third is an interdistrict/voluntary policy. Table 1 details open enrollment policies in Georgia.

Table 1. Open Enrollment Policies in Georgia

Type of Policy	Description
Intradistrict/ Mandatory	Allows students in low-performing schools (as designated by the state) to attend a different school within their district.
Intradistrict/ Mandatory and Interdistrict/ Mandatory	Allows the parent/ guardian or a student enrolled in a public school to request reassignment to a public school within the district if the school to which the student has been assigned does not have available permanent classroom space. Also allows the parent/guardian to request reassignment to a public school located in another school district if the student’s place of residence is located closer to such school, regardless of the school district in which the closer school is located.
Interdistrict/ Voluntary	Allows State Board of Education to permit students to enroll in a school in another district. School districts can contract with each other for the care, education, and transportation of students.
Source: Education Commission of the States. “Open Enrollment: 50-State Report.”	

Georgia’s House Bill 251—the Public School Choice Framework—was passed in 2009. It allows parents to request an intradistrict transfer as long as there is enough space in the school. Schools are required to inform parents of the availability of space by July 1st of any school year. Parents must cover the cost of transportation. Students who transfer to another school under this bill may continue to attend the school until the student completes all of the grades in the school, or the parent requests a transfer back to the home school.⁴

Vouchers

Vouchers are payments made directly to a parent or an educational institution by public or private sources to be used for the expenses of a child’s education, usually at a private or parochial school. Though some voucher programs are financed through private sources, others use public tax dollars to fund tuition at private institutions.⁵ In practice, most voucher policies target special populations (e.g., low-income students or students

⁴ Georgia Department of Education, Office of Policy and External Affairs. “House Bill 251 (2009) Public School Choice Framework.” June 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.k12.ga.us>.

⁵ A+ Education Foundation. “School Choice.” Alabama Education Policy Primer; ECS Educational Issues, “Choice.”

with special needs) or aim to serve the needs of students living in rural areas with no public schools.

Georgia enacted a public school voucher program in 2007. The Georgia Special Needs Scholarship (GSNS) Program is a scholarship program for special education students created by Senate Bill 10 (SB-10) during the 2007 Georgia State Legislature. The program provides scholarships for public school students with disabilities to attend eligible private schools, a public school in another district, or another public school in their own district. Under this new law, strict eligibility criteria govern which public school students can apply for a voucher. During the 2010-2011 school year, 2,550 students received scholarships to attend 190 private schools in Georgia. The award amounts ranged from \$2,453 to \$14,287; the average award was \$6,271.⁶

Tax Credits and Deductions

In their most common form, education tax credits and tax deductions compensate families for a portion of the expenses incurred by sending children to a private school. In other cases, tax credits and deductions allow taxpayers (individuals or corporations) to redirect their tax dollars to scholarship-granting organizations that award the contributions to students through private school scholarships. In 2008, Georgia lawmakers established the Georgia Private School Tax Credit law. The law allows taxpayers to qualify for an income tax credit for qualified educational contributions. Under this law, private citizens and corporations receive income tax credits for donating money to Georgia Student Scholarship Organizations (SSOs). SSOs, in turn, provide scholarships to parents who wish to enroll their children in private schools.

The Georgia General Assembly passed a revision of the tax credit law in 2011. The updated law permits private pre-kindergarten programs to participate in the scholarship program. The amount of each scholarship will be restricted to the average amount of state and local funding a student would receive to attend a public school. Finally, the Department of Revenue shall not require any information from SSOs other than the total number and amount of tax credits approved; the total number and amount of contributions; a list of donors and the value of each donation and tax credit; and the total number and amount of scholarships awarded.⁷

Homeschooling

Homeschooling is an alternative form of education for children whose parents or guardians prefer home instruction to formal K-12 public or private education. Parents, guardians, or other tutors typically instruct children who are homeschooled. Common reasons to choose homeschooling include opposition to the public school curriculum, the

⁶ Georgia Department of Education. "2010-2011 Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program (GSNS) Preliminary Quick Facts Report." December 29, 2010.

⁷ Georgia House Bill 325.

desire to add a religious perspective to curriculum, and the desire to increase the amount of individual attention given to a particular child.⁸

Georgia established homeschooling laws in 1984. At present, approximately 2 percent of all school-age children in the state are educated at their homes. Between the 2000-01 and 2008-09 school years, the number of Georgia children in home schools increased from 28,898 to 39,233 students, an increase of nearly 36 percent.⁹

Dual/Concurrent Enrollment

Multiple enrollment options afford high school students the opportunity to earn college credit either by enrolling in college-endorsed classes taught by their high school teachers at their regular schools or by taking those classes on college campuses or through a distance-learning provider. These options, including dual- or concurrent-enrollment programs and early-college programs, provide students with the rigor of a college curriculum and the opportunity to receive both high school and college credits. Georgia currently offers several options for public school students to participate in dual/concurrent enrollment programs: the Accel program, the HOPE Grant program; the Early Colleges; the Gateway to College Academy; House Bill 149, Move On When Ready; and two residential career academies. The Career Academies Project is a collaboration between the Georgia Department of Education and the Technical College System of Georgia that partners Georgia's local school systems with the state's technical colleges and local businesses. Career Academies provide Georgia students with alternative paths for education and enable high school students to earn a technical certificate. Established as partnerships between a local technical college and surrounding businesses, the academies create a program where students are trained to obtain well-paying, secure jobs in the local community.

Georgia Virtual School

The Georgia Virtual School (GAVS) is part of the Georgia Department of Education's Office of Technology Services. GAVS operates in partnership with Georgia parents and schools to offer high school level courses across the state. Like the previous e-Learning program, GAVS offers a wide variety of courses to Georgia high school students. However, GAVS serves public, private, and homeschool students and has expanded its course offerings to 78 unique core curriculum, AP, and elective courses with 198 variations, including SAT Preparation, each meeting QCC/GPS or College Board standards. GAVS courses are offered free of charge to all Georgia students who are taking the courses as a part of their state reported school day. Additionally, GAVS has a tuition program through which students can take additional courses to further enhance their course of study or to catch up if they have fallen behind academically.

⁸ Education Commission of the States. "Homeschooling." Retrieved from <http://www.ecs.org>.

⁹ Georgia Department of Education. "Homeschool/ Private School Enrollment Data." Retrieved April 22, 2010 from <http://www.doe.k12.ga.us>.

The National Perspective

In 1955, economist Milton Friedman published an essay entitled "The Role of Government in Education" that introduced the idea of using free markets in public education. More than fifty years later, school choice continues to be a controversial issue. Proponents of school choice argue that breaking the monopoly held by traditional public schools encourages educational innovations and improves the quality of all schools. Arguments in favor of expanded school choice programs contend that these programs benefit low-income, special income, or other traditionally underserved student populations. Additionally, because school choice programs allow parents to choose a school or program for their children, they may facilitate stronger parental involvement in education.

Several states have expanded choice options for students in this year alone. After losing funding in 2009, Congress restored the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship in the FY 2011 budget. In the spring of 2011, Indiana passed legislation offering vouchers to families earning up to \$61,000. Milwaukee, Wisconsin's Parental Choice Program, the oldest voucher program in the nation, removed the cap on the number of students who can participate and increased the income limit for participating families to \$67,000. One county in Colorado created a new voucher program and Ohio tripled the number of students eligible for vouchers. Tax credits were implemented in Oklahoma this year and expanded in Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, and Pennsylvania. Louisiana parents can write off their state income taxes up to \$5,000 for private school tuition. Indiana parents can write off up to \$1,000 for private school tuition or for homeschooling materials. Supporters of these choice alternatives believe that states are beginning to see the benefit of giving families more options.¹⁰

Yet opponents of school choice cite many arguments that counter the potential benefits of school choice. Many critics argue that school choice programs that involve private institutions are an inappropriate use of public funds. A mechanism such as a voucher program can divert resources away from public schools that still serve the vast majority of students, which could decrease the overall quality of public education. Additional questions are raised in regards to the beneficiaries of school choice programs. For example, school choice programs that provide only a portion of the cost of private school tuition, such as vouchers, tax credits, and tax deductions programs, primarily benefit affluent parents who can afford the additional costs. Opponents argue that such programs essentially subsidize private education for wealthy families. Lastly, school choice programs that force public schools to compete in the open marketplace may reduce the civic mission of public education, which trains students in citizenship and democratic principles.

While proponents of school choice stress that these models can increase school accountability, thereby improving academic outcomes for students, opponents are quick

¹⁰ Enlow, R. "Is 2011 Milton Friedman's Year of School Choice? [Commentary]." Education Week, July 28, 2011; The Wall Street Journal. "The Year of School Choice." July 5, 2011.

to argue that these programs at the operational level may have unintended consequences. School choice programs may skim the best students from public schools, leaving underserved students behind in under-resourced schools. Opponents also fear that school choice will increase racial and ethnic segregation, and may jeopardize the American ideal of providing a quality public education for all children.¹¹

¹¹ Education Commission of the States. “Choice.” Retrieved from <http://www.ecs.org>; Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. “Choice.” Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/rc/issues/choice>.

Research Tells Us

Magnet Schools

The National Center for Education Statistics reported that in the 2009-10 school year, 2,213 magnet schools were operational in 30 states. These magnet schools enrolled 1.5 million students.¹² Research on magnet school achievement is somewhat inconclusive. One study found that students in public magnet schools outperform students in traditional public schools in math, science, reading, and social studies.¹³ A study of magnet schools in Florida points to better academic outcomes than non-magnet students.¹⁴ A study of Connecticut magnet schools found that students attending a magnet high school had improved math and reading achievement and students attending magnet middle schools had improved reading achievement.¹⁵ Proponents argue that magnet schools are a proven model of success, but there are still questions about what aspects of a magnet program yield improved achievement.

Open Enrollment

Across the United States, open enrollment policies vary greatly. Forty-six states currently have some type of open enrollment policy, the most common being a voluntary interdistrict statute. Many states have more than one open enrollment policy, each designed for specific circumstances of student groups.¹⁶

Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), students attending a school in need of improvement may be eligible to transfer to another public school in their district. From 2003-2006, less than 2 percent of eligible students took advantage of this. As the number of schools in need of improvement increased, the percentage of students participating in NCLB choice has declined. Additionally, in 2004-05, only 0.9 percent of eligible African American students and 0.4 percent of eligible Hispanic students made such a transfer compared to 1.1 percent of eligible white students. It is likely that students do not exercise NCLB choice options because low-performing schools tend to be in low-performing districts. In 2004-05, districts that had at least one needs improvement school required to provide a school transfer had 42.4 percent of their schools in need of improvement. During the same year, only 7.8 percent of schools nationwide were in

¹² U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2009–10.

¹³ Gamoran, A. "Do Magnet Schools Boost Achievement?" *Educational Leadership*, October 1996.

¹⁴ Poppell, J. B. & Hague, S. A. "Examining Indicators to Assess the Overall Effectiveness of Magnet Schools: A Study of Magnet Schools in Jacksonville, Florida." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 2001.

¹⁵ Bifulco, R., Cobb, C. D., & Bell, C. "Can Interdistrict Choice Boost Student Achievement? The Case of Connecticut's Interdistrict Magnet School Program." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 2009.

¹⁶ National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. "Providing Quality Choice Options in Education." August 2005.

need of improvement.¹⁷ The number of schools in need of improvement has increased considerably since then, leaving students with fewer and fewer transfer options within their districts.

Vouchers

Currently, only eight states and the District of Columbia have adopted publicly funded voucher programs, and in every state the program serves only a targeted or limited population. In 2010-11, approximately 67,267 students participated in one of the nation's publicly funded voucher programs at a cost of nearly \$425 million.¹⁸

The Center for Education Progress recently reviewed a decade of research on the effectiveness of publicly funded vouchers for low-income students. They found no significant difference between the achievement levels of students who received the vouchers and comparable students who remained in public schools. Additional studies suggest that vouchers may have a positive impact on high school graduation rates; public school achievement rates as a result of competition with vouchers; parental satisfaction with the child's new school; and lowered costs for some taxpayers.

These latter results, however, had limitations. The increased high school graduation rate in Milwaukee's program was less significant or not statistically significant after researchers controlled for factors such as mother's education, income, living in a two-parent family, and religious attendance. The increased graduation rate in D.C.'s voucher program was based on parent reports. The increase in public school achievement rates as a result of competition with vouchers is also difficult to prove. Some states that had this increase in achievement also underwent other types of reforms at the same time. Finally, while vouchers did lead to lower costs for some, this did not extend to all taxpayers. Wisconsin taxpayers paid less in state sales and income taxes as a result of Milwaukee's voucher program, but property taxpayers in the city of Milwaukee actually paid more to offset the deduction of voucher expenses that otherwise would have been a part of Milwaukee's state aid allotment.¹⁹

Another important finding on Milwaukee's voucher program came to attention this year. For the first time since the program's implementation, Milwaukee's voucher students had to participate in state testing. The results showed that for all grades, 34.4 percent of voucher students were proficient or advanced in math compared to 47.8 percent of their public school counterparts, and 43.9 percent of low-income Milwaukee public school

¹⁷ Richards, M. P., Stroub, K. J., & Holme, J. J. "Can NCLB Choice Work? Modeling the Effects of Interdistrict Choice on Student Access to Higher-Performing Schools." The Century Foundation. Retrieved July 28, 2011 from <http://tcf.org>.

¹⁸ Campanella, A., Glenn, M., & Perry, L. "Hope for America's Children: School Choice Yearbook 2010-11." Alliance for School Choice, 2011.

¹⁹ Center for Education Policy. "Keeping Informed About School Vouchers: A Review of Major Developments and Research." July 2011. This research review focused on publicly funded programs for general education students. It did not include specialized voucher programs, such as those for students with special needs, remote rural students, and privately funded voucher programs.

students. Voucher students also performed worse than public school students on the state reading test.²⁰

Tax Credits and Deductions

In 2011, 123,544 students in seven states participated in a scholarship tax credit program. Over \$289 million was expended or donated for this program during the 2010-11 school year.

Individuals and corporations receive income tax credits for donating to Georgia's Student Scholarship Organizations (SSOs). Of Georgia's 33 participating SSOs, only one has public reports on the household income of scholarship recipients. The Georgia GOAL scholarship organization reported that for the 2010-11 school year, 29.8 percent of its scholarship recipients came from families earning below \$24,000 per year, while 26.4 percent of its recipients came from families earning over \$60,000 per year.²¹ Even though the scholarship is expanding opportunities for lower income families, many of them will still have to pay remaining tuitions costs not covered by the scholarship. Because wealthier families are more likely to be able to meet the remaining financial obligations, critics argue that the scholarship does not adequately expand options to lower income families and instead, makes it easier for wealthier families to send their children to private schools.²²

Homeschooling

Homeschooling has grown in popularity as both a state education policy and a personal education choice. As recently as 1980, homeschooling was illegal in 30 states. It was not until 1993 that all 50 states made the practice lawful. Yet since that date, homeschooling has become an increasingly popular option for American families.²³ About 2.5 percent of all students ages 5 through 17 were homeschooled in 2007.²⁴

A recent nationwide study of homeschooling found that students taking the California Achievement Test, Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, and Stanford Achievement Test, scored 34-39 percentile points higher than the norm of public school students in all K-12 core subjects.²⁵ The results of this study align with previous research indicating that

²⁰ "MPS Students Outperform Voucher Students." March 29, 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.todaystmj4.com>.

²¹ Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program, Inc. "Leading the Way: Annual Report, 2010-2011." Retrieved from <http://www.goalscholarship.org>.

²² Suitts, S. "A Failed Experiment: Georgia's Tax Credit Scholarships for Private Schools." The Southern Education Foundation, 2011.

²³ Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. "Homeschooling." Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/rc/issues/home-schooling>.

²⁴ Grady, S., Bieliick, S., and Aud, S. "Trends in the Use of School Choice: 1993 to 2007: Statistical Analysis Report." U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, April 2010.

²⁵ Homeschool Legal Defense Association. "Homeschool Progress Report 2009: Academic Achievement and Demographics." Note: Core subjects include reading, language, math, science, and social studies. The sample for this study included all 50 U.S. states, Guam, and Puerto Rico.

homeschool students tend to have higher levels of achievement than their public and private school counterparts.²⁶ Critics may argue that the results of these studies are not comparable to the homeschool population at large, or even that homeschool students simply do better on standardized tests.²⁷ Given the general reliance on standardized testing as a measure of accountability for academic achievement, however, homeschool students appear to do well.

²⁶ Rudner, L. M. "Scholastic Achievement and Demographic Characteristics of Home School Students in 1998." Education Policy Analysis Archives, 7(8), March 1999.

²⁷ Education Week Research Center. "Home Schooling." August 4, 2004; Updated July 13, 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org>.

For More Information

Education Commission of the States

www.ecs.org

An interstate compact with the mission of facilitating the exchange of information, ideas and experiences among state policymakers and education leaders, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) maintains an extensive website with a wealth of information about school choice.

Georgia Department of Education

www.gadoe.org

The Georgia Department of Education has detailed information about the state's alternatives to traditional public schools.