

A PRIMER ON SC

School choice is again at the center of the education policy debate.

But what exactly is it? Many policies and programs fall under this general term, which on one level simply means giving students options in where they go to school. But this debate is also about which schools receive funding from the government, and under what conditions. At the federal level, and in states and districts across the country, the debate is becoming more complicated, as stakeholders introduce new policies, programs, and messaging incorporating lessons learned from past school choice battles. For those who haven't been closely following these developments, it can be a bit confusing.

Below, find basic descriptions of some of the terms that figure into the debate that is underway in education and policy circles today.

Public vs. Private

One key distinction in the debate is “public” versus “private” school choice. With **public school choice**, taxpayer dollars, or “public money,” pays for students to attend a public school other than one they are assigned based on their neighborhood. With **private school choice**, public money can be used to pay for students to receive a private school education instead of a public one.

Neighborhood Schools

“Neighborhood schools” or “neighborhood public schools” typically refer to schools supported by tax dollars, to which students are assigned based on their home address—what most people think of when they hear the words “public schools.” In the vast majority of districts, all students have the option to attend a neighborhood school.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are independently managed public schools that operate semi-autonomously under a “charter” (or contract) with an authorizing agency (which, depending on state law, can be a district, university, nonprofit, private business, independent state board, the state, or another entity). The charter frees these schools from some rules and regulations that apply to other public schools (such as those around personnel and budgeting), though they must operate under others (such as those prohibiting tuition and requiring them to be fiscally transparent). In exchange for this autonomy, they must meet accountability standards outlined in their charter, and if they do not, the charter can be revoked and the school closed.



SCHOOL CHOICE TERMS

Magnet Schools

Magnet schools are public schools organized around a focused theme (such as STEM or global studies) and/or instructional model (such as Montessori or language immersion). They were originally developed as a strategy to increase racial diversity in schools, as students enroll because of interest in the school's academic program, not because of their home address. Typically operated by a school district or group of districts, magnet schools are held to the same standards as other public schools.

Open Enrollment

In most places, open enrollment means allowing students to transfer to neighborhood public schools other than the one they are assigned based on address. When the receiving school is located within their same school district, it is called **intradistrict choice**. When the receiving school is located in another district, it is called **interdistrict choice**. Receiving schools and districts continue to be held to the same standards as all public schools.

Vouchers

Vouchers allow students to attend private school at public expense, with the government providing a set amount of tuition money to parents or private schools directly. Program elements vary, but in many cases, private schools accepting voucher students are not subject to most government oversight (for example, around services for students with disabilities), though they often must meet certain standards (for example, accreditation).


Tuition Tax Credits

Tuition tax credits can operate in different ways. One is as **scholarship tax credits**, which give individuals and businesses tax credits for charitable donations to private, nonprofit organizations that provide private school scholarships—very similar to vouchers, but funds are raised and distributed in the private sector and result in lower tax revenue for the state. Another is as **individual tax credits** (or deductions), which provide families with tax benefits for private school expenses, such as tuition and textbooks.

Education Savings Accounts

Education savings accounts (ESAs) offer “educational” choice, removing the requirement that public funds be applied to school enrollment. Instead, a state puts money into special savings accounts that parents manage for education expenses. These programs vary by state, but generally the funds represent all or some of what would otherwise be spent educating the child in a public school. The money can be used for qualifying expenses that can (depending on the state) include private school tuition and fees, homeschooling materials, tutoring and test prep, homeschooling materials, therapeutic services, transportation, and more.

Learn More

These are very basic, neutral descriptions of terms you might hear in the school choice debate. When translating these terms into policy, they become significantly more complex, raising important questions of equity, separation of church and state, discrimination, the fixed costs of schools, accountability, forgone tax revenue, and more. Learn more about these issues at <https://learningfirst.org>. 

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